Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Editors' Introduction

by André m. carrington, Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT This issue of *Lateral* introduces new features and significant original scholarship, including the Feeding the Civic Imagination forum, the debut of Aporias, new additions to Years in Cultural Studies and Positions, three original articles, and several book reviews.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, protest, scholarship

In the spring of 2024, college students across the United States began staging encampments at their universities to draw attention to and protest the imminent genocide in Gaza. What began with a handful of spontaneous demonstrations spread to over a hundred schools all over this country and abroad, at McGill and Concordia, Sciences Po, the Sorbonne, Warwick University, Selçuk University, and the universities of Valencia, Melbourne, Sydney, Tokyo, and Kuwait.[1] The vicissitudes of the actions and their respective demands are heterogeneous; their development and progress has been varied; their strategies have met with mixed circumstances on the ground. When campers have faced mass arrests, white supremacist gangsters,[2] riot police, tear gas, and pepper spray, media coverage decries protests for "turning violent," as if through alchemy. Student-run independent newspapers and radio stations have surpassed both corporate and public media with exceptional journalistic insight into their own communities amid these events.[3] Some student activists, such as those at Evergreen State College,

the University of Minnesota, and the University of California, Riverside, have chosen to wind down or discontinue their actions after negotiating with university administrators.[4] Some administrations have pledged to keep the police at bay, while others have succeeded tragedy with farce by contracting out the written reflection papers they demand from students who allegedly violated their codes of conduct during the protests.[5] None of these outcomes represents a permanent resolution to the role of higher education, as an industry and as a sphere of public thought, in war and famine.

The military onslaught that Israel launched in response to the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, has destroyed every university in Gaza.[6] Like the movement to end apartheid in South Africa in the twentieth century, this wave of campus protests and institutional policy shifts register the deep continuities between power and knowledge. There is another generation of Palestinian students in Diaspora who will seek to understand their place in the world in light of these events. Wherever people are learning and thinking critically about the world around them, struggle ensues.[7]

We continue to think collectively and work together. This issue of *Lateral* introduces new features and significant original scholarship. The Feeding the Civic Imagination forum < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/> emerges from the collective responsible for *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (2020). As editors Do Own (Donna) Kim, Sangita Shresthova, and Paulina Lanz write, "Our understanding of food as a powerful entry point into the civic imagination is . . . deeply rooted in cultural studies where food is intertwined with issues of privilege, access, representation, language, ethnicity, and the materiality of culture." Like previous forums addressing topics from Universal Basic Income < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/universal-basic-income/> to the practice of Third Worlding < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/towards-third-worlding/> ,

this forum's contributors balance considerations of emotion, judgment, political economy, and methods for intellectual practice.

Also new to this issue is Aporias < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/aporias/> , edited by Joshua Falek. This section is devised to address conceptual gaps in cultural studies identified by early career researchers and junior scholars, whose training, lived experiences, and deep immersion in texts bring unique insights to the field. Ryan Carroll writes on the connections between political scholarship and political action < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/the-future-isnt-now-impossible-action-political-scholarship-carroll/> . Melayna Lamb and Tia Trafford rethink Foucault's notion of "carceral society" and recent calls to defund police < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/anti-blackness-as-disavowal-condition-foucault-carceral-society-lamb-trafford/> .

Sebastiaan Gorissen returns to the Years in Cultural Studies section with a perspective on 1980 < https://csalateral.org/section/years-in-cultural-studies/1980-neo-marxism-feminism-post-colonialism-gorissen/> , when decolonization, Marxist thought, and feminism turned in new directions to adapt to the changing landscape.

This issue also includes the third episode of Positions < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/the-world-as-abyss/> , with Andrew Culp and Cultural Studies Association's Black and Race Studies Working Group Co-Host Shauna Rigaud discussing *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (University of Westminster Press, 2023) with authors Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, and a scholarly commentary by Richard T. Stafford.

In "Cringe Theory," < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-1/cringe-theory-smilges/> J. Logan Smilges considers the affective and aesthetic contours of cringe and cringing. Beyond a purely physiological response, cringe is fully political—and thus informs how we come to feel normativity and respond to disability. Through

personal narrative and media analysis, Smilges demonstrates how cringe is always relationally and culturally situated. Smilges' work configures cringe not simply through the concept "structure of feeling" but rather recenters feeling through how disability is understood in the contemporary American public imagination and, as a result, transforms how we understand the association between "structures" and "feelings." Their entreatment of feeling through an aesthetic and affective phenomenology of cringing concretizes, elevates, and re-embeds cultural studies' conception of feeling to make an enduring contribution to contemporary theories of cultural studies.

Judy Rohrer's "We Are Not (Yet) Nonbinary" < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-1/we-are-not-yet-nonbinary-rohrer/> explores the generative legacies of queer, crip, and Indigenous analytics, considering lessons for shaping and intervening in the now and in the future. Speaking predominantly to white, temporarily-able-bodied, settler feminists interested in world transformation, she argues for the nonbinary as a collective political horizon rather than an individual identity, its pursuit a freedom *practice* to be built.

Chelsea Xu's "Affective Aesthetics: Mapping Visual Cultural Memories in the 2022 Anti-Zero-COVID Policy Protest in China" < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-1/affective-aesthetics-mapping-visual-cultural-memories-2022-anti-zero-covid-policy-protest-china-xu/> examines the recent "A4 Revolution" or "White Paper Revolution" within the historical lineage of the big character posters of the cultural revolution and other Chinese anti-imperial literature. Xu argues that contemporary modes of protest utilize these visual representations to forge affective bonds and build collective memory. Xu's qualitative analysis demonstrates connections among seemingly disparate moments of protest that, together, constitute an archive of tactics which have been used to combat state censorship and repression—the contemporary iterations of which have been effective primarily because of their ability to invoke the past in order to provide a repertoire of tactics for present-day protest.

Finally, this issue coincides with the launch of the Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism Research Collective (CcRrrC) < https://csalateral.org/ccrrrc> , an open access platform bringing together original analysis and curated resources about race and racism outside of the US. The platform hosts a global network of media makers, scholars, and activists turning to local and regional media and popular culture to identify and dismantle colorism and anti-Black racism. This project builds on the Middle East and North Africa / Southwest Asia and North Africa (MENA/SWANA) forum < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/> edited by Rayya El Zein in *Lateral* 10.1 and launches with sections focused on the Caribbean < https://csalateral.org/ccrrrc/caribbean> and East Asia < https://csalateral.org/ccrrrc/east-asia/> . CcRrrC is a ResearchAMP < https://researchamp.org/> project funded by SSRC < https://ssrc.org/> .

Notes

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Author Information

andré m. carrington

andré carrington is a scholar of race, gender, and genre in Black and American cultural production and a co-editor of *Lateral*. He is currently Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside. His first book, *Speculative Blackness* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016) interrogates the cultural politics of race in the fantastic genres through studies of science fiction, fanzines, comics, film and television. He is currently at work on a second book-length project, *Audiofuturism*, on radio adaptations of Black speculative texts. He is a past recipient of fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard and the National Humanities Center. With Abigail De Kosnik, he has co-edited a special issue of *Transformative Works & Cultures* journal on Fans of Color/Fandoms of Color. Carrington's writing appears in journals (*American Literature*, *Souls*, and *Lateral*), books (*After Queer Studies*, *The Blacker the Ink*, *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, *Black Gay Genius*), and blogs (*Black Perspectives*). He is also a contributor to the *Cambridge Companion to Queer American Literature*, *Digital Pedagogies in the*

Humanities, and *Keywords for Comics Studies*, and one of the founders of the Queers & Comics international conference.

View all of andré m. carrington's articles.

Robert F. Carley

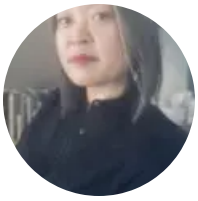
Robert F. Carley is Associate Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station.

View all of Robert F. Carley's articles.

Eero Laine

Eero Laine is an Assistant Professor at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

View all of Eero Laine's articles.



Yumi Pak

Yumi Pak is a student, scholar, and instructor of Black literary and cultural studies, particularly within the overlaps and interstices between the United States, Scotland, and Jamaica. She is currently associate professor of Black Studies and affiliated faculty in English at Occidental College. From 2014–2022, she was assistant/associate professor of English at California State University, San Bernardino, where she also held an appointment as director of Ethnic Studies, a long-standing program on campus; in 2022, she co-founded the Department of Ethnic Studies at CSUSB. Her writing can be found in various publications, including *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, *ASAP/Journal*, *Women, Gender & Families of Color* and *Dismantle Magazine*.

View all of Yumi Pak's articles.

SAJ

SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores policing, war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, gender, disability, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

View all of SAJ's articles.

Alyson K. Spurgas

Alyson K. Spurgas is Associate Professor of Sociology and affiliated faculty in the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Alyson researches, writes, and teaches about the sociology of trauma, the politics of desire, and technologies of care. They are the author of *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty-First Century* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020) and co-author of *Decolonize Self-Care* (O/R Books, 2023) among other articles and essays which can be found at alysonkspurgas.com.

View all of Alyson K. Spurgas's articles.

Chris Alen Sula

Chris Alen Sula is Associate Provost for Academic Affairs at Pratt Institute and Associate Professor in the School of Information. His research explores the digital humanities as a field, including curricula, the early history of DH, and disciplinarity. He has also published on citation studies in the humanities, the politics of technology, and ethical uses of data and visualization.

View all of Chris Alen Sula's articles.

Article details

andré m. carrington, Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas, Chris Alen Sula, "Editors' Introduction," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.1

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

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Cringe Theory

by J. Logan Smilges | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Cringe theory is a framework intended to make sense of cringe as a cultural and political phenomenon that has come to condition how disability is understood in the contemporary American public imagination. Informed by Silvan Tompkins' approach to affect, cringe theory has two distinct modalities. First, it can be understood as a suprastructure of feeling, a reflex tethered to our affective anatomy, which regulates the relationships between and among our emotions. This modality of cringe theory operates internally, telling us when to cringe, and each of us has our own, even if they do often resemble one another. The second of cringe theory's modalities comes into view as an analytic that traces cringe from the moment of its emergence through the ripple of its repercussions. As an analytic, cringe theory helps us to understand how cringing operates as a culturally conditioned response to the world and as evidence of our affective relations to normative power. By examining both the internal and analytic forms of cringe theory, I show that cringing is a deeply political experience, one that indexes affect as an internalized system of governance by which we come to feel with normativity. Disability is a perfect object for this kind of affective governance, given how often it is used to signify the porous boundary between the purely aesthetic and the resolutely political. By examining a series of recent, popular representations of disability that attempt to elicit cringing from the audience, I argue that we are increasingly encouraged to know disability through our felt or affective perceptions of it. Cringe theory reveals one route through which these affective perceptions are engendered, alongside the affective norms that condition how we are all feeling our way through life.

KEYWORDS aesthetics, affect, disability, representation

Imagine a scene with me: you're having lunch with a new friend at a quiet outdoor cafe. The food is delicious, and your new friend is turning out to be pretty friendly. Midway through the meal, music begins to play from a courtyard adjacent to the cafe. Its volume and tempo are higher than you'd expect to hear at your quiet lunch, but you continue eating. Your friend hears the music too and begins to bob

their head to the beat. They tell you that they love this song and that it always makes them want to dance. You chuckle and sip your tea. Suddenly, your friend stands up from their chair and begins to sway.

“What are you doing?” you ask.

“I told you. This song makes me want to dance.” They move away from the table and into the courtyard. You look around, wondering if others are watching. They are. Your new friend dances to the music. Hips shaking. Feet stepping. Arms waving. You’re in shock.

Several minutes pass, and your lunch partner has not returned to their seat. To the contrary, they’re dancing more intensely with a combination of movements that seem rehearsed, even if poorly executed. From the other side of the courtyard, someone else appears, and they’re holding a boombox that blasts the music you’ve been hearing. They begin to dance as well. But better. The second dancer is trained. Their movements are appropriate to the genre of the music. They have rhythm. And they are visibly confused about this stranger, your friend, who does not seem to have registered their presence.

It dawns on you that your friend has unknowingly joined a street performance. Other diners at the cafe are laughing, some are jeering, and a few begin to film the spectacle. You might’ve been embarrassed for your friend, but the ordeal somehow exceeds embarrassment. There is something about your friend’s unwavering focus, their commitment to their own bad choreography, and the obvious joy on their face that makes your stomach drop. Eventually, your friend acknowledges the other dancer and begins to move more vigorously. A dance-off begins, or at least the pretense of one. For each of the trained dancer’s precise movements, your friend flails wildly. At one point, with both arms thrown into the air, they jump in a circle, landing with a wobble.

A crowd has formed around the courtyard. The newer onlookers don't know what they're watching, but they can't look away. Most of them probably think it's a bit, a comedic routine meant to elicit cheap laughs at your friend's incompetence. A clown show. Frustrated by the mistaken crowd, the trained dancer taps out, retreating to a bottle of water. Your friend, with a proud chin, takes a bow. Everyone cheers. Overwhelmed, you sink into your chair. You cringe.

*

Cringe theory is a framework I've been working on for quite some time to help me make sense of the dynamics in scenes like these. I want to understand what constitutes cringing beyond a physiological response, which is to ask about its cultural and social dimensions. What is happening inside the cringer in the moment of their cringe? What is happening to others, especially the cringee or object of the cringer's cringe? Part of my curiosity is linked to the reasons we cringe—what causes cringing—but a much larger part emerges from my interest in the work of cringe, that is, in its effects on the cringer, the cringee, and others who occupy cringe's scene. I want to know what happens after the scene ends, when the friend eventually returns to finish their lunch. How has the dynamic changed, if at all, between the two friends? Was the cringe just a momentary flash of discomfort for one person, or did it perhaps alter something more fundamental to the relation between both people? If the latter is the case, what are the reverberations or aftershocks left in the wake of a cringe? And perhaps most important of all, how might a cringe shape not only these two friends' future interactions but perhaps also shape them as people outside of their isolated relationship? These questions hover around the notion of a cringe entelechy, cringe's storied lifespan and trajectory of dispersion.

I'll admit that my interest in cringe comes from living a life conditioned by it. As a child, I was constantly embarrassing those around me. I said inappropriate things

and asked inappropriate questions. As an adolescent, my body stole focus as the most awkward thing about me. It was like I was wearing a skin suit and never knew how to carry myself, position my arms, or sit comfortably. It came as no surprise, as I've written elsewhere, that my nickname in high school was Awkward John.[1] Throughout college and graduate school, I routinely entertained my friends with stories about the awkward encounters I had with strangers—the inevitable effect of my difficulties navigating small talk and assessing appropriate levels of intimacy. Even now my boyfriend says that my life is like one long episode of a prank television show. I accepted long ago that, for better or worse, I'm pretty damn cringeworthy. Cringe theory is my attempt to understand how being *cringe* has sculpted me.

But not just me alone. One of the driving motivations behind this project is my suspicion that cringe has a special relationship with many disabled people. Over the last two decades, cringe has become a popular representational mode for narrating disability in television and film. Characters on tv shows, such as Andy Dwyer in *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), Tracy Jordan in *30 Rock* (2006–2013), and Josh in *Please Like Me* (2013–2016), alongside characters in movies like Andy Stitzer in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), Bilo Sagdiyev in *Borat* (2006), and much of the cast of *Champions* (2023), come to mind. These texts narrate disability through what Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma call "cringe aesthetics."[2] Beyond an embodied experience, cringe can also be recognized as "a mode of expression" bridging "the tensions between drama and comedy." To express or represent disability through cringe is to present it in such a way that demands the viewer's discomfort. This discomfort can then be adduced as evidence of the narrative's authenticity or the disabled character's complexity. While I'll return to a longer discussion of cringe's representational power, I want to emphasize here that its growing popularity must be read in the context of increasing visibility among disabled people, particularly autistic and other neurodivergent folks.

A cringe aesthetics forces an affective response to disability's entrance into the public imagination, one that acknowledges our existence without ceding the value of established social norms. Disabled people can be present, but a cringe aesthetics ensures that our presence will be read as decidedly cringeworthy, thereby securing the norms that dictate not only how people behave but also how they feel. Among the goals of this essay is to assess how people come to know disability through their felt or affective perceptions of it. Cringe theory reveals one route through which these particular affective perceptions are engendered, alongside the affective norms that condition how we are all feeling our way through life.

In the pages that follow, I sketch out a working cringe theory. This theory can be described as having two distinct modalities. The first, which I describe in the next section, takes shape as a suprastructure of feeling, a reflex tethered to our affective anatomy, which regulates the relationships between and among our emotions. This modality of cringe theory operates internally, telling us when to cringe, and each of us has our own, even if they do often bare striking resemblance to one another. The second of cringe theory's modalities, which occupies the latter half of the essay, comes into view as an analytic that helps us to understand how cringing operates as a conditioned response to the world and as evidence of our affective relations to normative power. This modality invites us to critically examine cultural texts, including several that I discuss below, that invoke cringeworthiness or seek to evoke cringing from the audience. By attending to both the internal and analytic forms of cringe theory, I hope to show that cringing is a deeply political experience, one that indexes affect not only as a disciplinary tool to maintain social status quos but also as an internalized system of governance by which we come to *feel with* normativity. Sometimes, as I'll argue, cringing is elicited to give people the satisfaction of political engagement without demanding any material action from them. My intention is not to problematize cringe but to offer suggestions for how to navigate

cringeworthiness, both our own and others', in a way that is conscious of the conditions of its production and attentive to the distribution of its effects.

One final prefatory note is that I chose to open with a scene about someone dancing in public because it's a variation on a scene I've lived. I've been the person who heard a song they liked and who left their lunch to dance in public. I have a family who watched in horror as their teenage child grooved, who sunk into their chairs as they realized I had unintentionally inserted myself into a performance. I have a father who decided to film his dancing child with his phone. I have a family who continues to share the video over a decade later, trading it back and forth in group chats to laugh about. I know the video by heart, every move I made, every laugh from the crowd, every groan from my family. I've come to recognize my cringeworthiness through the eyes of cringers, and I've watched as the video's ongoing circulation has become both a product and producer—a living testament—of my queer neurological difference. If there's one thing I've learned by being the perpetual cringe object, it's that people trust you more when you're the cringer than when you're the cringee. I figured it would be safer to open this essay with a bit of role-play, a little masquerade of neuronormative affectivity, to gain your trust that I know what cringe is, even and perhaps especially because cringe is me.

Cringe Theory: Part I

To put it concisely, I understand cringing as a physiological response to an affective crisis, one typically generated by a disjuncture we perceive between our own feelings toward an object and others' feelings toward the same object. For me, cringing is not reducible or bound to a singular affect, whether embarrassment, shame, disgust, fear, or any other, but is instead the body's reaction when the norms on which we rely to tell us how to feel are called into question. To be sure, cringing is an affective experience, fundamentally

prediscursive and indeterminable, and yet it is not an affect itself. Cringing is a mechanism of our *affective infrastructure*, the phrase I use to capture the interplay among multiple affective norms at work within and across all of us. This mechanism is set into motion by our perception of affective fracturing or when we realize that someone with whom we expected to share feeling does not after all feel the way we do. Cringing occurs not necessarily when someone violates a social norm but when a person's feelings toward such a violation fail to align with our own.

Structures of Affect

My affective approach to cringe emerges in the lineage of Silvan Tompkins, whose psychoanalytic approach to affect theory preceded its institutionalization as an academic field. Though Tompkins has long been recognized as an early and important figure in the study of affect, I am keen to recover elements of his work that generally go under-examined. Namely, I am drawn to the rich language that Tompkins offers to articulate affective socialization, helping us recognize how a person's intimate feelings are contoured by the world around them. Part of this language is the phrase "affect theory" itself, which Tompkins understood an embodied structure of feeling functioning as "a simplified and powerful summary of a larger set of affect experiences."[3] Each of us, according to Tompkins, has a range of internal theories—or rubrics of feeling—that correspond with specific affects, such as a shame theory, distress theory, and fear theory. These theories correspond with not only what we actually feel in a given moment but also the rules we have learned about what we are supposed to feel. "Shame theory," Tompkins offers as an example, "is one such source of great power and generality in activating shame, in alerting the individual to the possibility or imminence of shame and in providing standardized strategies for minimizing shame."[4] Our experience of shame or any number of feelings is shaped by a combination of biological and cultural forces. Feeling, like most involuntary responses, is

informed by an archive of impressions between a unique bodymind and its social context.

While Tompkins uses the language of affect theory to refer to both "affect in general" and individual affects, I find it helpful to substitute the term *affective infrastructure* when addressing the relations across multiple affect theories.[5] In other words, a person's affective infrastructure speaks to the corpus of affect theories that each of us has developed to regulate our emotions. The term affective infrastructure also brings to mind affect's social dimension: that what we feel is conditioned by what others feel. Teresa Brennan refers to this social dimension as the "transmission of affect" or the way that "affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without."[6] Our affective infrastructure is made up of negotiations among the affects that surround us and our extant affect theories. What we feel is perpetually under revision by the feelings of others.

By proposing that cringe is a mechanism of our affective infrastructure, I am suggesting that cringe is a social phenomenon not only between individual pairs of cringers and cringees but also across all of us implicated in the systems of norms that govern our feelings. Cringe is less about our feelings toward others' actions than about our feelings toward feelings, both our own and those of others. This distinction is important because it allows us to differentiate cringe from other culturally conditioned forms of discomfort, such as awkwardness, anxiety, or dread. These other forms are typically elicited by an external object, such as a person, behavior, or situation; whereas, cringe is unusual in that it is prompted not by a conventional object but by our perception of another person's feelings toward that object. Affect itself becomes cringe's object. Cringing turns on the lights, however briefly or intensely, to reveal the socialized machinery controlling not what we feel, *per se*, but the structures of feeling that condition what we have come to regard as appropriate feeling or even natural feeling.

These normative feelings are the ones we expect and hope to share with those around us. By feeling the same feelings as others, we build social bonds through identification, in turn strengthening our affective infrastructures. I see myself in you because I feel myself in you, and such seeing and feeling of the other invites reciprocal seeing and feeling, meeting our desire to be seen and felt. To share affectivity can be a precondition for identification, for the kinds of relationality built on perceived similarities. And we take these similarities as reassurance that we're doing something right, that we're feeling something right. There's a rush that comes with realizing your feelings toward an object are shared with someone else. The excitement of learning that another person at the faculty luncheon watches *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the dark pleasure of direct messaging with someone online when you share a mutual nemesis, the hilarity of making eye contact with your friend in the virtual department meeting when the resident contrarian has predictably derailed the conversation. We cherish these moments of affective alignment because they recursively suggest that our own affects are properly aligned.

Many of us seek these moments out. It's why we drop hints into conversation about our favorite television shows, why we casually ask new acquaintances their thoughts on someone we dislike, and why we risk eye contact, a brush of hands, or a quick rub of thighs with strangers. These aren't merely rhetorical or physical gestures. They're affective ones, too—attempts at forging what Brennan calls a "line of the heart" that binds us into felt communion and that, through such binding, reinforces our confidence that we are feeling the world as we're meant to feel it.[7] Of course, efforts to establish shared feelings are not always possible. Sometimes we don't have much in common with the people around us. We all have people in our lives with whom we don't expect to identify. In these cases, we know we don't share feelings, and while our affectivities may still influence one another, they don't draw us together into that intimate web of mutual sensibilities. Not everyone likes everyone else, not everyone is friends, not everyone maintains resonant affective infrastructures.

Then there are those especially painful moments that fall between felt communion and non-identification. These are moments when we expect to share feelings but are left wanting, or when we do share feelings that are suddenly wrested apart. When your dinner date burps loudly in an upscale restaurant, when your friend sends you a terrible poem that they've written, when your mother posts a thirst trap on Facebook. In these flashes of affective fracturing, what we might imagine as frustrated, regrettable, or otherwise tested identifications, we are caught in fixed proximity to someone with whom we suddenly wish we didn't share or expect to share feelings at all. Affective fracturing generates an alternative rush to the one that corresponds with desired identification; it's a rush charged by the panic that you're feeling on your own, that your feelings may be wrong, and that the affective infrastructure modulating your feelings may be ill-equipped. This rush, Laura Kipnis describes, "overwhelms, registering as an uncomfortable, even visceral excess."[8] A cringe is such excess: nausea, clenched fists, a grimace, and wet palms—all symptomatic of embodyminded overload. When our feelings toward an object—the burp, the poem, the thirst trap—are called into question through troubled identification, we are faced not only with the fact of affective difference but also with the wound left behind by the affective intimacy that once was.

It is the impact of this carnage, the heartbreak of separation, that captures cringe's essence. Jason Middleton, in his book on cringe comedy, refers to cringe as "intrusions of the real in unexpected and unmanageable forms."[9] Unexpectedness is in part what makes the real so unmanageable. To have shared feelings suddenly disrupted is to have not only an individual affect theory interrogated (e.g., "Why am I feeling shame right now when you're not?") but also your entire affective infrastructure pulled into focus, revealing the competing structures of feelings that mitigate our interaction with the world. A barrage of questions intrude on the horizon of our consciousness: Is there something wrong with how I'm feeling? How do I know what I'm supposed to feel? And why don't I already know it? It's an affective crisis—a crisis of our feelings that threatens to

expose just how conditioned our feelings are. Cringing is a self-protective measure, an attempt to thwart the affective crisis before it evolves into a crisis of conscience and to defend the integrity of our affective infrastructure from our own disillusion. To lose faith in our affective infrastructure would be to admit its existence: the catastrophe of infrastructural failure is always a testament to our reliance on its power. It's scary to think about the conditioning of our feelings, especially when those feelings have just been rejected from a social bond. Cringing quells the fear, projecting the uncertainty onto someone else. A balm for the terror of a broken heart.

The Social Life of Cringe

I should clarify that I am speaking metaphorically—a kind of autistic hyperbole. Cringing doesn't feel much like fear or a broken heart. Cringing feels like *eww*, like *ick*, like *make it stop*. It feels like intensity. But metaphors are helpful because the feeling of intensity is inarticulable in the moment of the cringe, when the force of estrangement rips us from the security of affective relation and leaves us to feel, by ourselves, the world as it is, barefaced. Here we encounter Middleton's unmanageability of the real: when there is no one else and no more rules of engagement. It's just you and your feelings against a vast sea of randomness. This randomness produces what Adam Kotsko calls "radical awkwardness."[10] As opposed to the awkwardness that arises every time someone violates a social norm, radical awkwardness refers to the discomfort of navigating a clash between norms or "when there doesn't seem to be any norm governing a situation at all."[11] Cringing is a response to this normlessness, to the frenzy of emotion that follows not knowing how to feel. It is "a notable instability of feeling," according to Katja Kanzler, that signals a psychic grasping for direction.[12] Cringing is a substitute for that nonexistent direction. By locating cringeworthiness in an external object, we convince ourselves that cringeworthiness is another person's responsibility and

that we are merely its perceivers. This is a lie we tell ourselves: that cringe isn't about our own feelings but about someone else's doings.

We imagine that we're cringing because of another person's behavior and how that behavior reflects on them as an individual. *If only they would behave differently*—not burp in public, write better poems, avoid posting thirst traps—*they wouldn't be so cringeworthy*, or so we think. But among the key interventions of cringe theory is that a person doesn't become cringeworthy because of what they do but because of how others perceive that person's feelings toward their doing. We don't cringe at the object itself but at the conflicting affects projected onto the object. Even if a person is the object—someone begins dancing alone in public—we don't cringe at the person but at the sincerity we perceive in their movement, in the pleasure they take in their steps, in the confidence with which they wield their awkwardness. The cringe emerges in the moment of recognition, not that there is more than one way to be in the world but at the compounded affective tension arising from multiple ways to feel or not feel toward that being. Your date enjoys the burp, your friend is proud of the poem, your mom is excited by the photo. We all rely heavily on sharing feelings with others to reassure us of our own feelings. When someone fails to feel like we do, we are left second-guessing how to feel. Cringing transmogrifies this self-doubt into an assumption that the cringee lacks the knowledge that would presumably realign their feelings with our own. If they knew different, they'd feel different. If they felt different, they'd do different. If they did different, they'd be different.

But as someone who has long lived beneath cringe's banner, I can assure you that being cringeworthy isn't entirely up to the cringe. Cringeworthiness is accumulative. It builds over time, changing in texture and tenor, but nevertheless thickening with each successive cringe. The more I'm cringed at, the more I'm cringed at. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that shame leaves "a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion . . . has instituted far more durable, structural changes."[13] To imagine the bodymind as a record of affect

helps to dial in on how each affective interaction shapes us. While cringe is not an affect itself, it is affective in the sense that it too leaves impressions, altering the affective infrastructures that guide our future feelings. Each cringe conditions every future cringe, not only for the cringer but for all of us. Who and what we collectively consider cringeworthy is reinforced or contested with every individual cringe. And that reinforcement or contestation, that infrastructural alteration, influences how we perceive and respond to others' feelings.

Over time, these alterations expand the purview of our affective infrastructures. Tompkins proposes that an affect theory's relative strength can be measured by its breadth of application. Whereas a weak affect theory "accounts for a very restricted domain," such that it is only activated in specific circumstances, stronger theories are more capacious and responsive to "other potential sources" of the affect in question.[14] An affect theory grows stronger as an individual is faced with new circumstances that demand affective interpretation. Our affective infrastructure also grows stronger each time it is placed under pressure; it too evolves to accommodate our demand for instruction. When we cringe, our affective infrastructure is adjusted, however marginally, to take stock of the context: Who are we cringing at? What are they doing? How are they feeling toward that doing? And in what ways do their feelings depart from or contradict our own? The answers to these questions prepare us not only to better navigate future cringes but also to predict them before they occur. Affect theories, Tompkins suggests, can be used to "anticipate and avoid the experience of affect," particularly those affects that are undesirable.[15] Similarly, our affective infrastructures strengthen with each cringe, prompting us to anticipate cringeworthiness more frequently in an effort to prevent the discomfort that cringing brings.

Anticipating cringeworthiness often takes shape as non-identification. It's important to recall that cringing requires first and foremost the intimacy of shared feeling. Xine Yao refers to this intimacy as sympathy: "the fundamental mode of

apprehending affects, feelings, and emotions—and deeming them legitimate."[16] Without that sympathy, there can be no affective fracturing, only affective difference. If we don't care about how someone feels, or if we don't expect to share feeling with them, then there will be no affective grounds for us to cringe. Without sympathy, affective tension can be dismissed as unthreatening to our affective infrastructure and instead attributed to a fabulation of racial or disability difference.[17] It's notable, for example, that Kotsko uses people with "certain cognitive disabilities" as an example of a group that is "awkward by nature."[18] Presuming natural or inherent awkwardness in a person is not unlike presuming their cringeworthiness: both presumptions are proactive self-defense mechanisms intended to forestall shared feeling. In the minds of many nondisabled people, visible disability—especially mental disability—indexes a fundamental human difference that makes identification impossible or undesirable. It is more comfortable for them to deny the possibility of intimacy and identification straightaway than to risk the disappointment of that shared feeling if it is severed down the line. Identification through sympathy demands a degree of vulnerability, so our affective infrastructures erect an internal cringe theory to regulate that vulnerability, monitoring which people and in what contexts are safe enough to expect shared feeling.

I think about my family circulating the video of me and the pleasure they continue to elicit from it. When the video was first recorded, they were locked into cringe, overwhelmed by affective fracturing. But in the years since, I've come out with new identities, received several diagnoses, and settled into adulthood with an assuredness that I lacked as a queer autistic teenager. Now my family no longer expects to share feeling with me. They no longer expect to identify with me or to feel their feelings in my own. Quite the opposite from causing a crisis, their rewatching of that video only reinforces their affective infrastructures. It affirms that they are right not to share feeling with me. And that affirmation is itself a shared feeling for them, one that binds them closer through my continued affective abjection. They've learned to accommodate my feelings as symptomatic

of a perpetually externalized object. Their cringe theories having blocked me out, my family is free to watch me dance and think to themselves that I was never like them at all.

Cringe Theory: Part II

As I mentioned in the introduction, I don't want this essay to be all about me. I hope that the anecdotes I share about my relationship to cringe can be understood in the context of a larger argument about how cringe operates as a mode of social organization. I hope, too, that my family's evolving relationship to my affectivity can serve as a useful transition into cringe theory's second modality as an analytic. In the previous section, we approached cringe theory as a mechanism of our affective infrastructures, where it operates as an internal, involuntary process that helps us to navigate affective fracturing. In this section, I want to pivot us toward cringe theory as a mode of analysis, whereby it aids the mapping of our affective infrastructures by zeroing in on points of rupture that mark the limits of our extant affect theories. Attending to scenes of cringe reveals the fault lines in our affective infrastructures, where the norms shaping our individuated affect theories fall short. Cringe theory, as such, might be something that we not only feel with but also think with, illuminating both *what* we cringe at and *why*. It's here that cringing comes into focus as an affective heuristic: a grammar through which forms of difference, including disability, can become known through feeling.

Thinking with/through Cringe

To pilot the transition from cringe theory-as-mechanism toward cringe theory-as-methodology, it's useful to shift focus from the cringer to the cringee. In the moment of a cringe, the cringer projects cringeworthiness onto the cringee. Above, we learned that cringeworthiness does not emerge out of a person or their

behavior but out of affective tension between people—one of whom cringes in a desperate attempt to salvage the integrity of their affective infrastructure. It is fair to say that cringing tells us less about the person we're cringing at than about ourselves and our own affectivity. Nevertheless, the *effects* of a cringe are bilateral; they alter the affective infrastructures of both the cringer and the cringee. For the cringer, each cringe modifies their internal cringe theory, which consequently shapes their future cringes. For the cringee, being cringed at may not change their cringe theory (depending on their awareness of others' cringes), but it does change the likelihood that they'll be cringed at again. Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's work on emotion, we can recognize cringe as a sticky affective phenomenon. When a person is cringed at or regarded as cringeworthy, cringiness sticks to them and, in turn, polarizes them to attract future cringes.

Despite that cringes can be brief, their impressions are lasting, particularly because of how they transform the significations appending a person's affectivity. Stickiness, for Ahmed, entails "a chain of effects" that include "the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs."[19] To describe cringe as sticky is to acknowledge that affects can be objects and that people's feelings can amass signs based on how others' perceive them. Like disgust, cringing serves a performative function that Ahmed explains as "both 'lag[ging] behind' the object from which it recoils, and generat[ing] the object in the very event of recoiling."[20] To be cringed at is not merely to be recognized as cringeworthy but to be made cringeworthy. Once made, it can be difficult to be unmade or to be made differently. Similar to how our affective infrastructures are built up through the reinforcement of individual affect theories—themselves a product of accumulating affective norms—so too do the signs attached to our feelings accrue over time. Elsewhere, I've described this accrual as an effect of our rhetorical energy, the constellation of discourses that swarms our bodyminds.[21] Our feelings, too, can take on discursive meaning through affective interactions, such as cringes.

Cringing affixes meaning to another's feelings, transforming that other in the process and contouring how their feelings may or may not come to mean in the future. Again like disgust, cringing "can generate effects by 'binding' signs to bodies as a binding that 'blocks' new meanings."[22] Given the anticipatory nature of our affective infrastructures, being cringed at can abrogate the possibility of sharing feeling with others in the future. Being perceived as cringeworthy obstructs affective intimacy and forecloses the potential for identification. Cringing is a way of feeling otherness and of othering through feeling. To be cringed at is not only to have your feelings othered but also to become an other through the signs appended to your feelings.

It is worth highlighting the disciplinary power that cringing wields. Despite that cringing can occasionally be experienced by the cringer as a jarring free from the social order—a reaction to radical awkwardness—cringing over time, through repetition, takes on a more prescriptive function. This function no longer opens the bodymind to new ways of feeling but instead closes off the bodymind, making new ways of feeling seem undesirable or even impossible. This contradiction between cringe's enlivening felt experience and its normativizing effects is what makes cringe theory a useful methodological tool. To think with cringe theory is to identify cringe as a moment in which affective norms are created. Cringing simultaneously confronts the absence of a norm and renders someone else non-normative, the dark matter from which norms are wrought. Cringing thus invites a rare glimpse into the inception of a new norm: when deviance has been established prior to the formation of its respectable antithesis. Cringe theory asks us to center cringe and other responses to affective fracturing in our consideration of how normativity is engendered.

Aestheticizing Cringe

Increasingly, this engendering takes place in the context of a cringe aesthetic, which refers to the stylization of cringe as a genre of representation. According to

Havas and Sulimma, cringe aesthetics "overtly appeal to contemporary political sensibilities" because they manage to give the illusion of character complexity with the levity of comedy.[23] A cringe aesthetic intentionally elicits cringing from the audience to generate the feeling of political community without the weight of political responsibility. By "exposing central characters' personal faults or their social environments' shortcomings *as political issues*," a cringe aesthetic leads the audience into a sanctioned cringe that—through participating, through cringing—affirms the alignment of the audience's affective infrastructures.[24] This is a kind of cringe designed to reinforce the audience's ways of knowing and feeling toward the world. The genre solicits communal cringing to build affective intimacy through the shared critique of a character or environment, not unlike how my family bonds through their shared laughter at the video of me. It is a mediated form of cringe that curates a narrative to replicate the intensity of an affective crisis without any risk of vulnerability. Experiencing an affective fracture with a character is different than experiencing it with another person. We know the character isn't real, and we take comfort in its irreality. A cringe aesthetic is not unlike the genre of horror: it allows the audience to take their internal cringe theory for a test run without needing to worry about any tectonic shifts to their affective infrastructure or getting bludgeoned by a serial killer.

Disability is a perfect subject for this kind of affective experiment, given how often it is used to signify the porous boundary between the purely aesthetic and the resolutely political. In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson argues that "the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains," so that the appearance of disability almost always indexes "an ethical dimension."[25] While it is useful to differentiate between politics and ethics, one of the functions of a cringe aesthetic is to blur their boundary, encouraging people to feel righteous about their involuntary response toward the cringeworthy object, which itself can symbolize a political issue. Representations of disability facilitate this blurring of the political, ethical, and aesthetic through the anxiety they cause audiences, who are predisposed to *read into* disability some hidden or

deeper meaning. Nondisabled people in particular approach disability as an inherently ambivalent object, whether real or represented, that slips back and forth across "a pure process of abstraction" and "a set of material conditions."[26] A character's disability consumes them and yet signifies something beyond them, typically a "something" that assists nondisabled people in thinking or feeling toward themselves. A cringe aesthetic channels this ambivalence through an affective crisis in an attempt to trigger, but not threaten, the cringer's affective infrastructure, thereby fortifying their existing feelings toward the world. As a cringe object, the figure of disability reassures audiences that their cringing is an affective symbol of an admirable ethicopolitics.

There are many forms that a disability-centered cringe aesthetic might take. Often, it appears as cringe comedy, a genre in which the audience is meant to find humor in the affective tension produced between a disabled character and other characters or their surroundings. One example that I think about often is the character Kevin Malone from the American version of *The Office* (2005–2013). Throughout the series, Kevin's incompetence, unrestrained appetite, and lack of self-awareness routinely produce friction between him and other characters. This friction arguably comes to a head when an employee from HR, Holly, refers to Kevin as "mentally challenged" while defending him from another coworker's ableist bullying.[27] Kevin interrupts her, asking, "Do you think that I'm retarded?" Immediately, the tone of the scene shifts as the audience is led to believe that Holly has made a terrible mistake. The coworker who had been bullying Kevin, calling him a "dummy" and an "idiot," reprimands Holly by referring to her comment as "very offensive." In this moment, the specter of intellectual disability generates an affective crisis for almost everyone in the scene: Kevin for being called "mentally challenged," Holly for being corrected, and the onlooking coworkers for bearing witness to the tension between Kevin and Holly—one of whom gasps and places a hand over his mouth. The audience, too, is expected to cringe at the fallout from Holly's overconfidence. Though we are not cringing at Kevin directly, it is nevertheless the case that his character materializes cultural

assumptions about disability, and it is ultimately his contested disability that provides the affective conditions for cringing to occur.

Coincidentally, the cringing directed at Holly's blunder covers over the ableist bullying that precipitated her intervention on Kevin's behalf. The ethicopolitical stance affirmed by the scene is that it is far worse a crime to incorrectly suspect that a person is disabled than to launch ableist insults at people we don't like. We aren't meant to cringe in solidarity with Kevin when he is being bullied, but we do cringe in solidarity with him after he has been mislabeled. This distinction speaks to with whom we are expected to share feeling. Initially, we share it with Holly, who presents herself as a kind and rational defender of the weak. It is only after Kevin has been resignified as nondisabled that we are given the opportunity to establish affective intimacy with him, which is to say that it is only in the absence of disability that we are expected to share feeling, to identify. The revelation that Kevin is not "mentally challenged" lays the groundwork for Holly's cringeworthiness not only because she was mistaken about his disability status but also because Kevin's aggravation becomes more affectively relatable.

Affective relatability, or the perceived capacity to share feeling, marks a central feature of the cringe aesthetics of disability. For as often as disability is instrumentalized to make audience's cringe, it is rarely a cringe on behalf of a disabled person or character. Quite the opposite, when disability is present, cringe is generally invoked to erect affective distance between the audience and the disabled party. In these cases, the audience cringes because they cannot imagine feeling how a disabled person feels; disability exists beyond the limits of their affective infrastructure. This discomfort-wrought-by-the-unimaginable is particularly palpable in what Linda M. Hess calls "cringe tragedy," a genre of narrative in which "awkward moments are channeled into sympathy."[28] As opposed to cringe comedy, cringe tragedy provokes somber cringing, the kind that feeds righteous indignation. While Hess is optimistic about cringe tragedy's potential to destigmatize disability and raise awareness about systemic ableism, I

am more accustomed to tragic narratives that condescend and perpetuate stereotypes about the undesirability or unliveability of disability.

One example that comes to mind is *Atypical*, a Netflix original series about a white autistic teenage boy, Sam Gardner, and his family. The show has been thoroughly criticized by autistic people,[29] but its initial popularity is a testament to non-autistic audiences' interest in cringe tragic representations of disability. During the first season, one of the primary plot lines follows Sam's unrequited romantic interest in his therapist. In the second episode, Sam's father, Doug, mistakenly drives Sam to the therapist's house, thinking that he is taking his son to woo a teenage girl.[30] Rather than knocking at the front door, Sam opens a window on the front porch, effectively breaking into his therapist's home. Doug watches from the car in horror, whispering, "No, no, no, no," before racing out to find his son standing in the middle of his therapist's living room. The entire scene is painful to watch, and the cringe that ensues is directly tethered to the affective tension between Sam and his father. While Sam's behavior is itself a violation of social norms that produces awkwardness, it is Sam's obliviousness to that violation that makes the scene cringeworthy. Despite his confusion about where he was driving, Doug is still the most affectively relatable character. He is the one who expresses surprise at his son's actions and fears them getting caught. The audience is never meant to share feeling with Sam; we are meant to share feeling with the father about Sam.

It's through this shared feeling with Doug that we come to know Sam as a character. Sam's autism is made legible not only through his behavior but also through the feelings of other characters, which we in turn are meant to adopt. When I talk about the stickiness of cringe, this is what I'm referring to: cringeworthiness is appended to Sam through his father's feelings, feelings that we are meant to share, and by sharing them, we confirm their rightness. By sharing Doug's feelings, we not only accept the assessment of Sam as a cringeworthy character but also adhere cringeworthiness to Sam's autism. It's

here that the boundary between the representation of disability and the perceived experience of disability grows thin. "Because disability in the real world already incites interpretation," Quayson writes, "literary representations of disability . . . are refractions of that reality, with varying emphases of both an aesthetic and ethical kind."[31] A cringe aesthetic can imbue preconceived attitudes toward disability with an ethical valence, roping a common stereotype into a broader political agenda.

The above scene from *Atypical* confirms stereotypes that autistic people do not respect others' boundaries and that they are predisposed to illicit sexual desire. By narrating these stereotypes in the context of Sam breaking and entering into his therapist's home, *Atypical* frames autistic people as potential threats to the sexual safety of others. The scene dramatically escalates the stakes of autistic stereotypes, transforming them from common sentiments into political issues. The cringe that it attempts to elicit from the audience is meant to confirm our own felt agreement with the escalation: that we not only believe the stereotypes but also feel the urgency with which they demand our attention. It is relevant that *Atypical* was informally endorsed by Autism Speaks, a hate group dedicated to eradicating autism, which promoted the show on its Twitter page and blog.[32] Such an endorsement clarifies that any sympathy *Atypical* fosters toward Sam or autistic people is a sympathy laced with disgust. It is to say, "I feel bad for you," which is another way of saying, "Your existence makes me feel bad," or "I'd feel better if you didn't exist."

Across cringe comedies and tragedies, a cringe aesthetic papers over the gap between the intensity of an audience's feelings about disability and their typically limited knowledge of the experience of disability. When disability is invoked to condition or elicit a cringe, the audience is invited to recognize their cringing as felt confirmation of what they already believe about disability, namely that it exists beyond the realm of identification. A cringe aesthetic of disability runs on a circular logic, wherein disability comes to be known through feeling because it is

imagined to be unknowable, and yet it is imagined to be unknowable because it is assumed to be affectively impenetrable. Known to be unknown through the feeling of unshared feeling. What I've been proposing as cringe theory helps us to identify the stitching between feeling and knowing, along with how that stitching enables the politicization of knowledge. Feeling as an ethical intensifier.

A Cringeworthy Politics

While a cringe aesthetic often harnesses feelings toward disability in ways that are used against the interests of disabled people, the purpose of cringe theory is not merely to problematize cringe aesthetics, let alone cringing. Cringing is an involuntary response, not something we can consciously control. Likewise, a cringe aesthetics is merely a response to what the writer, creator, or artist perceives as the affective infrastructure of their intended audience. Cringing isn't ableist, even if cringe theory illuminates how our feelings have been shaped by ableism. A cringe aesthetics can be ableist, but it doesn't have to be. Cringe theory exposes cringe's contingencies. It peels back the layers of our response to an affective crisis to identify which of our feelings have been confirmed, which have been contested, and which—through these competing processes of confirmation and contestation—have been generated entirely anew.

Having said this, I remain skeptical about attempts to reclaim a cringe aesthetic for anti-ableist or other liberatory purposes. As the popularity of cringe aesthetics rises, so too does the appropriation of cringe as an educational tool for introducing normative audiences to their own cringeworthiness. Sharon Tran describes this appropriation as "redirect[ing] the cringe, a bodily gesture of turning inward, toward external systems of inequality."[33] To redirect a cringe is to suggest that affective tension is produced not by the person who violates a social norm but by the expectation that it be followed. The strategy attempts to produce a self-directed affective fracture in which recognizing yourself in the image of a cringeworthy other forces you to acknowledge your own cringeworthiness. In the

context of disability, redirecting the cringe exposes the quotidian ableism that makes living a normative life impossible for many disabled people.[34] It is meant to encourage nondisabled audiences to take stock of how abled norms are incompatible with disability, thereby revealing the norms themselves as inadequate and the people who cling to them as cringeworthy. In contrast to the typical power structure erected by a cringe aesthetics—in which, per Havas and Sulimma, "we do not cringe *with* but *at* characters"—redirecting the cringe is intended to provoke reflexivity.[35] As much as I admire this goal, I am left troubled by how strategic redirection tends to presume a normative audience, effectively recentering a normative affective infrastructure.

There is an opportunity lost when a mode of expression or representation is reclaimed only to still prioritize the feelings of a dominant group, such as nondisabled people. My intention here is to interrogate the concessions made whenever anti-ableism takes shape as a pedagogical intervention. Teaching and learning are good, but in the context of a cringe aesthetic—where feeling and knowledge are entwined—I worry when normative audiences come to believe that cringing is a suitable substitute for the more challenging work of reconciliation. I'm thinking of the masochistic impulse that insulates people from acknowledging their relation to power: when being scolded or made to feel shame somehow releases the pressure of holding oneself accountable for their actions. While a cringe aesthetics is not necessarily scolding, and though cringing itself is decidedly not reducible to shame, there is something similar about their felt intensity.

In a neoliberal context, where consumption takes precedence over action, the decision to allow oneself to be affectively engaged can be mistaken for an act of justice. Activism can be misconstrued as the content you stream, the social media accounts you follow, or the information you absorb. When a person feels the right feelings toward the right objects, it is assumed that they know the right knowledge—itself a replacement for doing the right thing. A cringe aesthetic that

cedes a normative affective infrastructure, that operates according to the affective rubric of an audience aspiring to normativity, risks shoring up the mythos of such affective activism. A cringe aesthetics that fails to deprioritize the feelings subtending ableism can only ever operate in relation to ableist feelings. I suppose I'm not satisfied with that relation.

I'll give an example of this kind of failure. In 2014, Scope—a self-described "disability equality charity" in the United Kingdom—launched a campaign entitled "End the Awkward."[36] According to Scope's website, the campaign is "aimed at helping people feel more comfortable about disability" by "us[ing] humor to get people thinking differently."[37] We can notice immediately that the audience targeted by the campaign is comprised entirely by nondisabled people or those who "feel awkward around disabled people."[38] The campaign prioritizes affective infrastructures that regard disability as inherently cringeworthy. In 2015, Scope released six short films as part of a "What Not To Do . . ." series, which depicts nondisabled people as cringeworthy when they interact with disabled folks. Each film is structured as a reaction video, where a white disabled journalist, Alex Brooker, cringes at a prerecorded hidden-camera scene. In the scene, two paid actors—one disabled, one nondisabled—interact among unsuspecting strangers. The nondisabled actor fumbles through the interaction, saying and doing awkward things that cause people nearby to cringe.

In one film, the actors stage a pickup scene at a club, where a hearing man attempts to invent signs to communicate with a Deaf woman.[39] In another film, a sighted woman dips her Blind date's hands in his food.[40] In still another film, a tall employee lifts his short statured coworker onto a seat without her permission.[41] Across all the films, the audience is given explicit directions on when they are supposed to cringe, delivered by both onlookers' facial expressions and Brooker, who narrates his discomfort with lines like, "You can't just try sign language," "He's blind; he's not stupid," and "You can't just lift her."[42] Setting aside the lateral ableism wrapped up in the word "stupid," Brooker's reactions are obviously not

designed for a disabled audience. Most disabled people don't need it explained to them how not to be cringeworthy around disability.

My frustration with this campaign is not just that it centers a nondisabled audience but that, by centering a nondisabled audience, it becomes unclear what purpose cringing serves. Read generously, the cringe is meant to prompt introspection: the nondisabled audience watches the films, identifies with the awkward, nondisabled person, and navigates the fallout of the subsequent affective crisis by altering their future behavior to prevent further identification. But I'm not convinced that this is how cringing works. It's true that, when we cringe, our affective infrastructures are modified to safeguard against future affective crises, but the modifications are not necessarily behavioral. Often, they're more discreetly affective. Cringing teaches us with whom it is not safe to share feeling, and that lesson results first and foremost in a kind of speciation or typologizing among different kinds of people. Sometimes typologizing encourages us to change our own behavior to ensure we fit into a desirable category, but more often it convinces us that there was no identification in the first place. Cringeworthiness sticks to *them*, not us. And by sticking it to them, we protect ourselves, assuring one another that so long as we can recognize cringeworthiness, we can never be cringeworthy.

This misguided self-assurance not only diminishes the pedagogical impact of a redirected cringe aesthetic but also individuates its lesson as a matter of personal feeling. Disability rights activist Lorraine Gradwell argues that such individualizing is the primary problem with Scope's film series: "'End the Awkward' neatly ignores the pressing matters around disability such as social security, housing, and hate crime . . . treating people's attitudes to disability as if it were just a matter of good manners, when in reality it's often about blatant discrimination."[43] A redirected cringe aesthetic that relies on cringing as the sole measure of an audience's learning neglects to account for how cringing can be experienced as a cathartic relinquishment of responsibility. Instead of helping audiences to situate

themselves within networks of structural power, sometimes cringing does the opposite. Each time something is made into an object of cringe, our feelings toward it are opened up and left to oxidize as part of a chemical reaction with normativity. Once brought back under control, the affective crises that cringe generates can, counterintuitively, strengthen normativity's hold over our feelings, making it easier to forestall or prevent identification before an affective crisis begins. The easier it becomes to refuse identification, the more powerful our affective infrastructures become. The more powerful these infrastructures become, the more confidence we grow that our feelings are the right feelings and our knowledge, the right knowledge. A cringe aesthetic that doesn't challenge the status quo isn't redirected at all; it's merely initiated from a different angle.

If a cringe aesthetic is going to be effectively redirected away from disability, it must force the audience into a meaningful confrontation with the abled norms that structure their own feelings. It must take on an edge of anti-ableist criticality that slices deep into the audience's affective infrastructure to leave them gasping at the sheer overwhelm of felt intensity. I'm calling for a more thoroughly cripped cringe aesthetic that incites a cringe not only at the exposure of the audience's own prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory behaviors but also makes clear that these attitudes and behaviors are terrifying. They frighten us disabled people. I don't care whether nondisabled people cringe at themselves; I want them to feel me cringing at them, and I want them to know that my cringe emerges not from my disappointment in their failure to abide by social norms but from my horror that their feelings cause material harm. I want them to feel my feelings toward what their feelings do. I also want them to feel my cringing stick to them. I want them to feel what it's like to be made cringeworthy, not in a way that they can disavow by cringing at themselves but in a way that reveals cringeworthiness as a requisite condition of complicity with the ableism structuring our world.

*

I'll end with a final scene. This time, I'll admit upfront that it happened to me.

You're at your first faculty retreat for a new job. It's a long day of meetings, but you're excited. Nearly every faculty member in the department is present, and you're looking forward to meeting people you missed during your campus visit. Throughout the day, you shake many hands, smile many smiles, and start many pleasant conversations. Despite the drag of the day, you're feeling optimistic. It feels like people want you here.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, you grow a little overwhelmed. It's been more noise than you're used to in a single day. The overhead fluorescent lights are bright. The heavy perfume on a colleague is starting to get to you. The best solution appears to be some light stimming. You get up from your seat and move to the back of the room to avoid distracting others. Your favorite stim at the time is rocking back and forth, heel to toe, and repetitively touching your thumbs and forefingers together. It's a perfect combination because it involves full body engagement but is nearly silent and allows you to participate in conversation. Within minutes, your breathing has evened out and your muscles have relaxed. It was a good decision to get up. So good, in fact, that you decide to spend the rest of the afternoon where you are.

When the day ends, you return to your seat to gather your belongings. A colleague tugs on your sleeve. "Next time you're having a seizure, what would you like me to do?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Next time you're having a seizure like I saw you having earlier, should I call somebody or get you something?" The colleague is visibly concerned. "I felt so bad for you."

“I wasn’t seizing; I was stimming” You respond. “I’m autistic.”

“Oh, that’s fascinating. My nephew is on the spectrum. His parents found this incredible therapist for him, and now you wouldn’t even know he has autism.”

Your stomach drops. Your colleague is describing applied behavior analysis, a harmful clinical practice aimed at autistic children that resembles conversion therapy. It’s psychologically, sometimes also physically, tortuous. You force a weak smile.

“I could get you the therapist’s number if you want.”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind.” They pause. “Do you want to come out for drinks tonight?”

You politely decline and take the long route home. *This fucking shit*. When you get home, you eat dinner and get ready for bed. Sitting up against your pillows, you check your inbox before turning out the lights. There’s an unread message from your colleague.

Subject line: “Just in case!”

The message: a name, a phone number, and an email address. Then, “I felt like you would change your mind.”

She felt.

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Author Information

J. Logan Smilges

J. Logan Smilges is assistant professor of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia, where they research and teach at the intersection of queer/trans disability studies, the history of medicine, and rhetorical studies. They are the author of *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022) and *Crip Negativity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

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Article details

J. Logan Smilges, "Cringe Theory," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.2

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

We Are Not (Yet) Nonbinary

by Judy Rohrer | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT I am addressing this paper to other white temporarily-able-bodied settler feminists interested in moving, not just toward a queer (queerer?) horizon, but toward a nonbinary liberatory futurity as a collective political aspiration (not an identitarian goal of self-actualization). In this paper, I consider how we might mobilize the nonbinary as a freedom practice, a practice building toward a future where we are all free. Imagining and creating a liberatory inclusive future necessarily requires dismantling the constrictions of reproductive futurity, constrictions built on binary analytics. This paper begins with an outline of how a sense of urgency, legal and medicalized frameworks, and anti-victimism have dominated post- Dobbs responses and reinvigorated an allegiance to retrograde, repressive reproductive futurity. This brief discussion of post-Dobbs responses sets the stage for an exploration of a more expansive, inclusive, collective futurity beyond the settler state, a freer futurity made possible by mobilizing a nonbinary intersectional critique anchored in queer/crip/Indigenous analytics.

KEYWORDS ableism, crip, futurity, nonbinary, queer, reproductive justice, settler colonialism

> "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain."
>
> – José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*[1]

Since José Muñoz declared us as not yet queer, we have also not yet achieved many other designations, in spite of loudly self-proclaiming them (my address is largely to queer white able-bodied scholar-activists). Especially in academic

spaces, we like to declare ourselves: decolonial, intersectional, accessible, inclusive . . . And of late we increasingly talk about being nonbinary, even as we clearly remain trapped in dichotomies, dualisms, and binaries. We have not (have we earned Muñoz' "yet;" is "yet" too prescriptive?) embraced nonnormativity, unassimilation, unrecognizability, disidentification, noncompliance, failure, unproductivity, refusal in our relationship with the US state. Our imaginaries are constrained by fantasies of a benevolent settler state and teleological progress narratives, both of which undergird notions of American reproductive futurity. Regardless of whatever radical politics we claim, deep down many of us still "desire the state's desire,"[2] and that captures us in the perpetual dichotomies of white supremacist, settler colonial, capitalist, ableist, heteropatriarchal frames.

I am addressing this article primarily to other white temporarily-able-bodied settler feminists interested in moving, not just toward a queer (queerer?) horizon, but toward a nonbinary liberatory futurity as a collective political aspiration (not an identitarian goal of self-actualization). My rationale for imagining similarly positioned feminists as my target audience is that we often hold positions of power in which we (re)produce the violences of the binary. Instead of writing toward an abstract audience, I am trying to implicate myself, "collect my cousins," practice "calling-in." In what follows, I consider how we might mobilize the nonbinary as a freedom practice, a practice building toward a future where we are all free. Imagining and creating a liberatory inclusive future necessarily requires dismantling the constrictions of reproductive futurity, constrictions built on binary analytics.

Pushing past oppressive reproductive futurity into a freer future requires attending to who we imagine the future is for, what life matters generations ahead. Imagining future life clearly ties to issues of reproductive justice/freedom, issues that have been brought into stark relief with the overturning of Roe v. Wade via the Dobbs decision and subsequent abortion bans. Whitestream feminist responses to the Dobbs decision and its aftermath highlight our continued

allegiance to binary thinking and resistance to embracing, not just nonbinary people, but nonbinary practice and analytics—practices that enable us to build toward an expansive, inclusive future.

This paper begins with an outline of how a sense of urgency, legal and medicalized frameworks, and anti-victimism have dominated post-Dobbs responses and reinvigorated an allegiance to retrograde, repressive reproductive futurity. We are clearly not yet queer, but also seem to be doubling down with our binary selves. This brief discussion of post-Dobbs responses can be considered a sort of case study revealing this regressive binarism. It could stand on its own as a critique of post-Dobbs responses, but I wanted to stretch beyond a critical stance toward alternative possibilities. In doing this, I move from a more traditional analytical format, in which my analysis is foregrounded, to a more exploratory stance. In the balance of the paper, I work to step to the side, highlighting the work of queer, crip and Indigenous scholars without pretending to be able to neatly tie it all together.

The first section of this article, "Post-Dobbs Resurgent Reproductive Futurity," establishes how the confines of the binary still hamper our actions and imaginaries. As such, it sets the stage for a necessary exploration of a more expansive, inclusive, collective futurity beyond the settler state, a freer futurity made possible by mobilizing a nonbinary intersectional critique anchored in queer, crip, Indigenous analytics. I marshal these analytics because they are derived from the lived experience of those never meant to inhabit the future. They are not exhaustive of frameworks that help dismantle regressive binarism but are three that, in concert with each other, are particularly challenging to me as a white temporarily-able-bodied settler feminist. The second section, "Reproductive Justice and Queer/Crip/Indigenous Futurities," explores how these overlapping analytics provide generative space to push beyond the biopolitics and biocapitalism that fuel reproductive futurity, and to notice how those logics can sneak back into reproductive justice frameworks.

Queer/Crip/Indigenous futurities are so generative partly because of their nonlinear, dynamic, animate, nonbinary, relational conceptions of temporality and spatiality. "Queer/Crip/Indigenous Spacetime" builds from the previous section providing a gloss of how these intersecting analytics stretch our imaginaries of the time, space, and collectivity we are working to liberate (post-Dobbs it should be clear even to the most privileged of us that collective liberation, not savior politics, is the order of the day).

In the final section, "Desiring Otherwise and the Nonbinary," I consider the work nonbinary does that differentiates it from the alternative constructs of "neither/nor" and "both/and." I circle back to Muñoz's queer horizon and demonstrate the nonbinary potential within queer/crip/Indigenous analytics making spacetime to desire otherwise into expansive liberatory futurities. Ultimately, I hope to invite others who are similarly situated to recognize the generative possibility of these combined analytics to disrupt dominant biopolitical, biocapitalist settler temporality which violently advances through reproductive futurity, including the elimination of Natives, crips, queers.

Post-Dobbs Resurgent Reproductive Futurity

In the late 1990s, women of color organized a political movement beyond whitestream reproductive rights, defining reproductive justice as "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities."[3] In the current post-Dobb's landscape, we are implicitly or explicitly told that the urgency of the moment requires that we *not* think more capaciously about what reproductive justice might look like. We have been here before. The perceived urgency of a political and/or legal campaign becomes justification for cutting corners, not being accountable, throwing the most vulnerable under the bus.

Urgency has been identified as one of the main characteristics of white supremacist culture, along with binary thinking. On her *White Supremacy Culture* website, Tema Okun asserts that a sense of urgency "makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think and act long-term, and/or to consider consequences of whatever action we take." The way that urgency forecloses a deeper understanding of long time becomes clearer in the discussion of queer/crip/Indian spacetime. Further, and particularly relevant post-Dobbs, Okun says urgency "frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of BIPOC people and communities in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)."[4]

Urgency fuels a compulsion to try to "get the law to say 'good' things" about us,[5] which in turn leads to centering the most normative and/or most "innocent" in our communities—normativity and innocence being well-worn binary constructs. In an effort to show how ubiquitous abortion is and to counter stereotypes about who gets abortions, advocates highlight personal testimonies from model citizen women, as well as stories featuring "innocent victims" or "perfect plaintiffs"—in this case, the subjects of the oft-used phrase "victims of rape or incest." Both reinscribe cisgendered (binary) assumptions about who gets pregnant and who is worthy of an abortion, while rape/incest stories can lead to trauma porn through media sensationalism.

A sense of urgency has also been used to justify the backlash against gender-inclusive language post-Dobbs. That backlash is driven not simply by cisgenderism, but by adherence to legalistic, medicalized, and anti-victimist discourses. For instance, Loretta Ross, well-known reproductive justice founder, has argued post-Dobbs against the use of gender-inclusive language: "Using gender-neutral language around pregnancy, abortion and sex discrimination is as damaging as using colorblind language around race discrimination because it fails to identify the targets, the victims and the specificity of the oppression."[6]

That statement demonstrates how easy it is to get caught in a legal framework (and "like race" analogizing) that demands a proper plaintiff that the law will recognize. We become convinced that we cannot name the sexism and misogyny fueling the anti-abortion attacks without standing up the biologically sexed woman (which assumes that's a thing) as our proper plaintiff. Without her, we cannot show sex discrimination, and sex discrimination is what the anti-abortion laws are, or so that argument goes. In the *Ms.* article where they quoted Ross, Carrie N. Baker and Carly Thomsen argue, "the language of 'pregnant people' hides the sex-based impacts of abortion bans . . . Eliminating references to women from our abortion advocacy . . . blocks a potent equality argument against abortion bans."[7] Desiring the state's desire compels us to contort ourselves in uncomfortable ways, ways that push us back into dark closets and the straight-jackets of binary sex-gender normativity.

Medical discourses work in tandem with legal ones as is evident in the persistence of the biological woman as proper subject (of feminism, of feminist legal jurisprudence). Pro-choice advocates advance arguments about fetal viability, ultrasounds, trimesters, high-risk pregnancy, medical abortion, miscarriages, ectopic pregnancy, and so forth. And these arguments are amplified by the sense of urgency about abortion access unleashed by Dobbs (to which many disabled/BIPOC feminists have been responding "welcome to our world" and reminding us, among other things, of decades of impact from the Hyde Amendment). In this political environment, it sounds callous to suggest that this medicalized discourse limits our conceptions of reproductive justice.

Post-Dobbs we have also seen a predictable upsurge in claims to cis-women's fragility and victimhood. These are mobilized through arguments contending that inclusive language is not just ridiculous and unnecessary, but a form of authoritarian misogynist censorship that is erasing "women."[8] Alyson Cole instructs that anti-victimism is a form of "doubling and circuity" whereby

dominant groups “prop ideal forms of true victimhood (and assume the mantle for themselves)” in order to “suppress, negate and erase most victim claims.”[9]

Chase Strangio, Deputy Director for Transgender Justice and staff attorney with the ACLU, argues, “those close to power will often punch down. Those now feeling precarious need to be held to account rather than letting them align with power.”[10] This debate has made it painfully evident how committed many are to maintaining the comfort (another characteristic of white supremacy culture) of current sex-gender binaries, leaving others of us wondering, “do we prioritize privileged people’s slight feeling of awkwardness or discomfort, or do we think about the actual more material effects that some of these words have, and try to remedy that.”[11]

If we are going to strive toward repositioning nonbinary as a freedom practice, we need to push the biopolitical limits of reproductive justice, even in its gender-inclusive invocations. “Pregnant people” and “birthing people” after all evoke a reproductive futurity that too often finds a home in our demands for the future. Is it possible to imagine a liberatory future without fantasizing about the bio-children who will inhabit it? And, insofar as legal and medicalized discourses constrain our politics to legal remedy and medical intervention, we assume the continuance of the repressive state institutions, and the US state itself.

We cannot apprehend governmentality from positions that take the state for granted, now and in the future. So, the larger question seems to be, can we conceive of, and practice, a futurity that is not reproductive of the white supremacist, ableist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist, extractive, carceral, settler state? Moving from this case study of binarism in post-Dobbs responses, in the next section I explore this question by tapping into intersecting queer/crip/Indigenous analysis of biopolitics and biocapitalism. I start with the queer critiques offered by Lee Edelman and José Muñoz and weave in crip and Indigenous analysis. I think we get closer to a reproductive justice, a futurity that

does not simply include more queers/crips/Natives, by centering epistemologies that build worlds that can hold all of us.[12]

Reproductive Justice and Queer/Crip/Indigenous Futurities

"Queer theory has always been a theory of kinship" even when not stated directly,[13] and queer scholar-activists have made generative interventions in unsettling our compulsory devotion to "a better future for the children." This has meant not just challenging heteronormative futurities (Edelman's "heterofuturity"), but also intervening in homonormative narratives featuring lesbian and gay parents as "just like" their straight counterparts. These narratives purport equivalency by obscuring, among other things, the enormous biocapitalist expenses of accessing reproductive technologies/surrogacy/adoption services and legal protections that put prospective non-heterosexual parents in decidedly different positions from procreative straight parents. Queer and trans scholarship have also worked to delink parenting/mentoring/caring for young people not just from birthing, but also from normative family models. This continues to be a heavy lift given the persistence of predatory stereotypes invoking "recruitment" and "grooming"—narratives recently mobilized yet again in "don't say gay" bills.

For all the problems with his argument, Lee Edelman's book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* helped me think about the need to imagine and build a future without centering "The Child" in a fetishized way.[14] Rather than take up his nihilistic "fuck the future" stance, I found value in his interrogation of reproductive futurity. Jack Halberstam articulated it this way: "No future for Edelman means routing our desires around the eternal sunshine of the spotless child and finding the shady side of political imaginaries in the proudly sterile and antireproductive logics of queer relation."[15]

I further learned from generative critiques coming from queer of color, disability, critical ethnic and Indigenous studies scholars demonstrating how Edelman's critique reproduced the monolithic conception of "The Child" as always already white, settler, able-bodyminded. Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* contains one of those generative critiques, pointing out the unacknowledged privilege animating Edelman's necropolitics and suggesting instead that "the future is queerness's domain."[16] Layered scholarship has encouraged us to consider the biopolitics and biocapitalism mobilizing by the figure of The Child that justify dispossession, genocide, institutionalization, pathologizing, carcerality of undesirable Others.

While we may be encouraged to think about the various gender-identities of parenting people, we are almost never encouraged to think about those people as disabled or as birthing disabled children, except insofar as those imaginaries facilitate ableist arguments. This, even though, 25 percent of the population lives with one or more disabilities and QTBIPOC and poor people are disproportionately represented in that number.[17] As part of a continuing history of reproductive injustice (including forced sterilization, lack of contraceptive control, denial of sexual identities and practice, institutionalization, state interference with parenting, and so forth), when disability does appear in contemporary debates, it is still most often as something to be avoided or "cured."

Critical disability and crip scholar-activism, which moves beyond the identitarian and rights-based focus of earlier disability studies scholarship, provides an incredibly useful tool in recognizing the ways reproductive futurity and the medical industrial complex (MIC) are reified in post-Dobbs discourse. Over the last decade plus these scholars have invited us to think instead about a "future for crips," a spacetime of "desirable disability," a way to "dream disabled dreams," an embracing of the value and beauty in crip futures and "brilliant imperfections."[18] By cripping futurity, this work refuses "chrononormativity" built "on the smooth rails of normative life stages" (en)abling linear productivity, development, longevity.[19] Speaking into the queer critique of reproductive futurity, Alison Kafer

writes: “Not wanting to cultivate queerness, or to build institutions supporting that kind of cultivation, is intertwined with fears about cultivating disability.”[20]

From this vantage point it is clear that disability is weaponized by both sides of the polarized abortion debate. Understanding this enables us to resist a post-Dobbs politics complicit with reproductive futurity. Disability justice group Sins Invalid points out, “On one hand, the fear of disability has been used as a tool to manipulate people’s reproductive choices, sometimes causing people to opt for selective abortions to avoid disability, which is in fact eugenics. Simultaneously, disabled people have been forced to terminate pregnancies under the pretense that we cannot be good parents because we are disabled.”[21] Or, more concisely, there is a “double lack-of-futurity—disabled children without futures and a future without disability.”[22] Both selective abortion and denial of disabled parenting are predicated on reproductive futurity in which, as Kafer writes, “disability, in other words, becomes the future of no future . . . ”[23]

In “Crip Kin, Manifesting,” Alison Kafer expands this theorizing working across scholarship by Donna Haraway, Kim TallBear, Juana María Rodríguez, Mel Chen, and others who help dislodge bio-children as our only once and future kin. She writes, “Building on scholars who recognize ‘kin’ as encompassing more than the biological, reproductive, legal, and human, I discuss the possibilities of ‘crip kin,’ recognizing the queer possibilities of intimacy with other presences and entities.”[24] Kafer’s crip kin are fantastically disruptive of many of the limiting binaries of heteronormative reproduction: normal/abnormal, human/technology, human/animal, animate/nonanimate, intimate/distant, familiar (family)/strange (stranger), success/failure. One of the artists Kafer introduces us to is Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi whose “Baby Onsies” invite us to imagine a world welcoming infants with nonnormative limbs (see Figures 1 and 2). Like Yi, Kafer works “collaboratively, recognizing the need for imaginative kin formations that stretch beyond the familial or reproductive.”[25] Kafer’s crip kin frolic far from the fetishized Child of repressive normative futures.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Baby-Onsie-1-jrohrerca.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Baby-Onsie-2-jrohrerca.jpg>

Figures 1 and 2. Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi (she/her/hers), "Baby Onsies"

Ensuring that we continue to trouble our theorizations and connect them to lived experience, other scholars have troubled any easy binary between (bad) reproductive futurity and (good) crip futurity. Insisting on a historical materialist analysis, Nirmala Erevelles cautions against abstracting discourses that simply situate disability as "possibility rather than limit," reminding us of all the ways structural oppression helps produce disabling and debilitating conditions for marginalized communities. Jina Kim and others demonstrate how "the constellation of disability/debility/capacity . . . emerges out of necessity from the conditions of settler colonialism, US empire building, the 'work machine,' and the 'war machine' that need 'bodies . . . preordained for injury and maiming.'"[26] Kim's analysis is all the more critical as we witness "the constellation of disability/debility/capacity" emerging from the US-Israel settler colonial attack on Palestinians in Gaza. This includes not just targeted Palestinian death/disability/debility, but the high-tech harvesting of sperm from fallen Israeli soldiers in extraordinary attempts to secure settler futurity.[27]

Adjacent scholarship examines ways the carceral state needs debilitated and disabled, but live, subjects—how it "invests in the animacy of its target with the goal of endless captivity."[28] These interventions stretch our conceptions of crip futurities in their analysis of imperialism, incarceration, and capitalism as not just productive of, but reliant on, debility and disability. Significantly, dominant post-Dobbs responses have given little attention to impacts on those incarcerated in jails, prisons, detention centers or to larger questions about how analysis of disability/debility/capacity stretches reproductive justice into anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, abolitionist orientations.

Sins Invalid and others have declared that "reproductive justice is disability justice." They point to the long history of US attacks on the bodily autonomy of marginalized people and assert "disability justice values an intersectional analysis

which requires us to consider the complexities of reproductive justice in the context of ableism."[29] Explaining how disability justice is an anticapitalist and anticolonial movement, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, "we don't think disabled liberation will happen if a handful of white disabled people get rich and powerful, and we see colonization as being a birthplace of ableism."[30] Or, in the words of multiply-disabled, bisexual, Native, Two-spirit womxn Jen Deerinwater (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma), "until tribal sovereignty is the law of the land, I will never have full reproductive justice. The colonizer's court will never bring sovereignty."[31]

The colonizer's court has in fact been expressly focused on disrupting and eliminating Native sovereignty and thus Native futures, including through use of medicalized discourses of eugenics, disease, and disorder. Susan Burch's work on the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians (1903–1934) analyzes how pathologization worked systemically to disrupt Indigenous kinship, communities, nations, and therefore, futurity:

By imposing settler forms of medicine and knowledge practices, settler ableism actively serves and reflects broader colonial principles and aspirations . . . Through the lenses of normality, fitness, and competency, settlers have judged Indigenous people and nations. Historically, settlers have interpreted Native people's unwillingness or inability to conform to colonial ideals, such as individuality, heterosexuality, and materialism, as indications of inherent deficiencies or defects.[32]

In studying archival documents and hearing stories from relatives of Native peoples committed to Canton, Burch notes the very different conceptions of health and wellness between those incarcerated and their keepers: "Although tribal systems of medicine and spirituality vary widely, common qualities of well-being are shared by many Native nations, including Dakota people: harmony between body, mind, and spirit as well as between people and the broader natural

and supernatural worlds."[33] This meant that "wellness required ending pathologized dislocation and returning members to their rightful place—physically among their people and physically and metaphysically to an Indigenous world."[34] While "normality, fitness, and competency," Western markers of health, all rely on the binary thinking, being physically and metaphysically in an Indigenous world absolutely disrupts that thinking.

In the settler state's quest to eliminate Native people, pregnancy, birthing, childbearing, and child-raising have all been targeted, making it clear why a more expansive reproductive justice frame is needed. Significantly, Native women in particular have historically resisted surveillance and control.[35] Similar biopolitical machinations (couched firmly in "the best interests of the child" narratives) are currently mobilized in legal attacks on the Indian Child Welfare Act with hopes that a win enables broader assaults on tribal sovereignty (luckily, SCOTUS rejected the constitutional attacks in Brackeen v. Haaland but they will continue). So, settler colonialism feeds itself by pathologizing not just individual ("insane," "sub normal," "incompetent") Natives, but Indigenous kinship practices writ large. The construction of the alcoholic, abusive, poor, dysfunctional Native family has justified dispossession, family separation, sterilization, incarceration in asylums/boarding schools/prison, and non-Native adoptions for centuries.

Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), an Indigenous STS scholar who has been pressing beyond the binaries of kin/not kin, life/not life, monogamy/nonmonogamy for some time, writes, "Perhaps our kinship arrangements are actually culturally, emotionally, financially, and environmentally more sustainable than that nuclear family, two-parent model we are so good at failing at, and that's why we are 'failing.'"[36] There are resonances here with the queer kinships, orientations, and genealogical approaches of Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.[37] Instead of the "successful" nuclear family, TallBear is interested in "recognizing possibilities of other kinds of intimacies—not focused on biological production and making

population, but caretaking precious kin that come to us in diverse ways—is an important step to unsettling settler sex and family."[38] Fantasizing about "making population" via future bio-children is anathema to TallBear.

Across the continent and the Pacific, Kēhaulani Kauanui (Kanaka Maoli) demonstrates the way colonial biopolitics have played an intimate role in shaping Kanaka Maoli articulations of Hawaiian sovereignty, including through narratives of Hawaiian exceptionalism that operate through a disavowal of indigeneity. Kauanui writes, "the concept of colonial biopolitics illuminates the governing of Indigenous life, death, reproduction, gender, sexuality, relation to land and property, and other sites of state power over both the physical and political bodies of the Hawaiian population."[39] By writing about the "physical and political bodies," Kauanui reminds us that settler futurity relies on the elimination of Native people, kinship, and sovereignty.

Thinking with queer/crip/indigenous kinship and futurities enables complex understandings of how assimilation, recognition, inclusion, internalized oppression, debility, and disavowal, produced by the biopolitics of the state work to disrupt and eliminate nonnormative, unproductive, undesirable life. This assists our capacity to imagine beyond a future of liberal inclusion, to resist the compulsion to desire the state's desire and its naturalized biopolitics of inclusion and exclusion. As the editors of the anthology *Queer Kinship* write, "Kinship is a technique for exclusion and inclusion, and a set of conceptual building blocks for forms of relationality that obviate and lay bare its biopolitical work. Kinship is a domain without which we cannot think in some ways but beyond which we absolutely must think, act, and live."[40] This brief exploration of queer/crip/Indigenous kin-making and their contributions to expansive, nonbinary reproductive justice leads inevitably to thinking otherwise about space and time.

Queer/Crip/Indigenous Spacetime

As we have seen, the biopolitics of reproductive futurity shape decisions in the now which impact life now and generations ahead (human, other-than-human, ancestral, planetary). Thinking about "alternative" futurities matters because it is about who is and is not supposed to inhabit the future. And, we cannot think about queer/crip/Indigenous futurities without considering the spatial and temporal dimensions (spacetimes) from which those futures emerge. Here I focus primarily on Indigenous spacetime for brevity and hope it is suggestive of how queer and crip temporalities also encourage us to imagine more expansive liberatory futurities. I briefly discuss settler temporality before offering theorizations of Indian time and haunting. This section ends with examples of Indigenous analysis of the animacy of place and how genealogical relationships demonstrate long, deep connections to peopleplace (following Donna Haraway's "natureculture," I use this unhyphened term to suggest the indivisibility of the two, to interrupt the binary, to recognize place as relation).

It is so difficult for some of us to imagine queer crip futures because the biopolitics of the state, practiced through the legal system and Medical-Industrial Complex (among other institutions) as highlighted post-Dobbs, is anchored in a naturalized Western teleology that makes desiring "a better future for the children" unquestionable common sense. This progressive teleology also ensures Indigenous people are either nonexistent, vanishing, and/or anachronistic, as most famously articulated in the justification of boarding schools to "kill the Indian, save the man."

Settler temporality "situates white Americans as the privileged subjects of history, resulting in a vicious binary of 'modern' and 'traditional.'"[41] Recognizing the interrelation of spacetime, Indigenous studies scholars mark settler time as "space-time colonialism," "colonial time," and "settler memory." Settler time has sought to eliminate Natives by capturing them as pre-modern/uncivilized/savage,

ontologically unable to exist in modernity – hence, anachronistic or ungrievable "past tense presences."[42] But arguing for inclusion and recognition in modernity accepts the binaries of pre-modern/modern, savage/civilized, not existing/existing that scaffold settler time. Instead, many scholars suggest Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination are generated in a plurality of non-chronological temporalities or "temporal multiplicity."[43]

If settler time marches forward in an "apocalyptic teleology,"[44] unfolding in a naturalized, scientific, measured, straight (and able) line, marking events on chronological timelines (securing The Past, privileging the present, and constraining The Future), Indian time does time differently. It offers temporal multiplicity, as do "POC/queer/crip time." Importantly, these nonnormative ways of "being-in-time" are not recognizable/reducible as the binary opposites of a singular, hegemonic, unitary conception of time. They are inherently queer and unruly. Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman suggest "crip time isn't easy, it isn't fair, it cannot be reasoned with."[45]

Useful here are Indigenous theorizations of haunting which are absolutely not easy, fair, or reasonable. They gesture toward temporal multiplicity, nonbinary analytics, and nonreproductive generation/futurity, which is important if we are building toward futurities that can hold all of us. "I don't want to haunt you, but I will" is about as far from a plea for inclusion or recognition in settler spacetime as one can get.[46] In fact, "haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop . . . Haunting aims to wrong the wrongs."[47]

In "Before Dispossession, or Surviving it," Angie Morrill (Kalamath), Eve Tuck (Unangax̂), and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective reference "a host of gone peoples," "future ghosts," "fugitive outsiders," and their "visitations," "hauntings," and "afterlives." They write, "when I told you that I will probably haunt you, you

made it about you, but it is about me. The opposite of dispossession is not possession. It is not accumulation. It is unforgetting. It is mattering."[48]

If settler time is bent on dispossession, Indian time is not the reverse. Indian time, conceived of here as haunting, is about the mattering of Indigenous life—ancestors, decedents, all relations. The essay continues, "I am preparing my future haunting. A haunting born and unmoored from horror, before and beyond dispossession. A stateless and constant form of passage. A passage that is always passing. A shady sort of sovereignty."[49] Haunting, as a "constant form of passage," a stateless and "shady sovereignty," insists on futures beyond the settler state big enough to hold on-going Indigenous presence/continuance/mattering that include, but also transcend, embodied beings considered scientifically alive.

These articulations of haunting as Indigenous temporality challenge all white settler feminists to push beyond comfort, fear, and denial (all characteristics of white supremacy culture) without knowing what exists on the other side (which, of course, wrongly assumes there are "sides"). They explode any tidy boxes where we have safely stored our versions of reproductive justice—our neat, complete ideas about the futures we are building and who will inhabit them.

While queer, crip, POC, and Indian time are kin (with all the complicated, messy relations of kin), Indigenous temporalities are intricately interconnected with Indigenous conceptions of peopleplace. So, not only do Indigenous epistemologies disrupt the linear forced march of settler time, but they also upset the violent cartographies of settler spatiality—and critically, they do so by refusing another duality, space/time. "Indigenous duration operates less as a chronological sequence than as overlapping networks of affective connection (to persons, nonhuman entities, and place) that orient one's way of moving through space and time, with story as a crucial part of that process."[50] Rather than the poststructualist genealogical disruption of "there is no there there," this offers

“there was no then then.” In Indigenous spacetimes, peopleplace happenings occur otherwise to Western “there” and “then.”

Thus, many Indigenous people talk about belonging to land, not the other way around. And that belonging is not static or mappable, but relational, reciprocal, developed in temporal multiplicity, as with human relationships. One belongs genealogically, one is known to a peopleplace. This is important because it stretches kinship not just across/through time but with place. Reproductive justice then cannot just be about having/not having, raising/not raising bio-children in a two-dimensional here and now. This alternative orientation is a further invitation in our post-Dobbs era to stretch beyond linear temporality and anthropocentrism, both of which rely on binarism.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), notes that in English we use “it” as a pronoun for plants, whereas most Indigenous languages speak of the living world as beings, as relatives, not objectified natural resources for exploitation.[51] Katrina-Ann R. Kapāʻanaokalāokeola Nākoa Oliveiria (Kanaka Maoli) analyzes Kanaka Maoli place-making practices as “performative cartographies” where belonging to place means caring for that particular place, including telling the stories, singing the songs, naming the winds and rains of that unique and living place.[52] This idea of performative cartographies builds on Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa’s (Kanaka Maoli) explanation that “genealogies *are* the Hawaiian concept of time, and they order space around us. Hawaiian genealogies are the histories of our people.”[53] Or, as Chamorro lawyer, and now poet, Julian Aguon suggests, “our stories are maps larger than can be held.”[54]

Pacific Islanders have long argued against land-locked theorizing of spacetime relationships. Tiara Naʻputi (Chamorro) takes Mishuana Goeman’s (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) concepts of “(re)mapping” and “spatial decolonization” to the ocean to “argue for a remapping of the Marianas as expansive, oceanic sites of resistance to colonial cartographic violence and US militarization.”[55] A deep

understanding of these genealogical connections means that reproductive justice must engage decolonial politics (where decolonization is not a metaphor but about Indigenous sovereignty with/on/in the land and water) and should encompass rematriation ("Indigenous women led work to restore sacred relationships between Indigenous people and their ancestral land").[56] It also necessarily means that reproductive justice is intrinsically linked to climate justice and the critical work of intersectional climate futurism.

Desiring Otherwise and the Nonbinary

Thus far we have explored queer/crip Indigenous futurities, the ways they challenge reproductive futurity, and, to the extent that it remains sutured to bio-children, also reproductive justice. That discussion led to consideration of how those futurities emerge from non-dominant spacetimes. Nonbinary thinking is foundational to all of this and so, in this final section, I bring nonbinary thinking back in to reconsider its potentiality and our current state of not being there/then yet. I end with a contemporary queer Indigenous scholar who builds from José Muñoz, (re)turning us toward other horizons.

If binaries trap us in an either/or whereby one pole is valued/positive in contradistinction from the other, the potentiality of the nonbinary is not in either of the two most cited alternatives: the neither/nor and the both/and. Although both of these conceptualizations could be characterized as the opposite of the binary, nonbinariness inherently rejects an opposite, thus the "non" should be understood less as "against" and more as "beyond" or "otherwise." In this way, it is possible to stretch into its potentiality. The nonbinary desires otherwise. The discussions above of queer/crip/Indigenous kin and their spacetimes overflow with the desires of others, with other desires.

Neither/nor says, I see the two choices offered and I am picking neither of them. I am opting out, not playing. Ruthlessly pursued, it can lead to anti-sociality, necropolitics, nihilism. Edelman's *No Future* falls into the neither/nor bucket because it rejects not just the heteronormative temporality (straight time) of reproductive futurity, but also any alternative queer temporality. Edelman is claiming "we will never be queer" because there is no future for queerness.

Both/and is frequently offered as the alternative to binary formulations. This has been the case in much feminist theorizing, and while both/and usefully disrupts the unjust valuation of dichotomized categorization, it does not break the mold. Instead, it says "all of the above," "I'm fully in," "yes to both," but that concedes to there being only two choices. At least, the "both" concedes to a twoness. The "and" might be understood to recognize a continuum between two opposite poles, but that still accepts the frame, doesn't break the mold.

I think this is why "otherwise" has risen in popularity, especially in critical scholar-activist circles. There is nothing prescriptive or predetermined in "otherwise," no neither/nor, no both/and to reject or embrace. It moves across/beyond/sideways to dominant formulations. It does not necessarily reject or refuse them (and it certainly does not embrace them), but instead does its own thing. I think "otherwise" lives in the same wheelhouse with "nonbinary." They both do the work of inviting us outside of normative frames. Nonbinary breaks from polarity into multiplicity, plurality, and messiness. Alison Kafer desires a future for a multitude of queer crip kin. Kim TallBear wants us to consider possibilities of other kinds of intimacies, polyamories, and caretaking relationships outside "making population."

Significantly, the otherwise and beyond of these "alternative" temporalities (shorthanded as queer/POC/crip/Indian time) should not be conceptualized as completely unaffected by dominant temporality and the way that temporality seeks to reproduce normativity. They know it is there, they have been/will be

impacted by it (genocide, colonialism, ableism, racial capital . . .). They are not impervious, unaffected, above it. Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee Nation) writes, "turning away from the state does not mean complete disengagement. It does, however, entail a decentering of the state and other colonial entities by consciously recentering Indigenous nationhood and land-based governance."[57] This turning away from the settler state and toward Indigenous governance is a nonbinary move otherwise. Admitting to being influenced by/oriented by/affected, is part of what distinguishes the otherwise from the complete detachment or break of neither/nor, which is often an exercise in privilege, as per Edelman.

I started with José Muñoz's declaration of an otherwise through the potentiality of queerness that launches *Cruising Utopia*. I circle back through Billy-Ray Belcourt's (Driftpile Cree Nation) ruminations from a lyrical essay entitled "Red Utopia." In his "theoretical polyamory,"[58] Belcourt, a queer Indigenous poet/author/scholar, draws on Muñoz, other queer scholars, affect theory, Black Studies, Chicanx feminisms, Afrofuturism, Critical Race Theory, and Indigenous literatures and studies.[59] Belcourt writes,

> the otherworldly is a core facet of NDN life. In the somewhere/time, in the land of the un-, optimism is neither cruel nor does it get swallowed up in an emotional economy of scarcity. Loneliness, the affective state of being in a world one doesn't want, makes utopia a thinkable concept . . .
>
> How to punctuate an aesthetics of suffering, its visibilization regime, with a counternarrative of NDN possibility? Hypothesis: be negative space.[60]

Belcourt's work manifests otherwise, "agitates ideation" across generative (nonreproductive, nonbinary) somewheres/times, is the warmth of Muñoz's horizon (making "utopia a thinkable concept"), and at the same time, a negative space, the land of the un-.[61]

Belcourt's self-solicitation to "be negative space" is not the opposite of a static positive space, but rather a constantly moving outside, a beyond. NDN

counternarrative is not the authentic/true/innocent flip side of settler narrative. The land of the un- is not a destination, it's not the other direction from colonization, not a nostalgic past, not a prescribed futurity. Insofar as we can apprehend some of its potentiality (kin to, but not the same as, Muñoz's queerness), it might inspire us (settlers) to desire otherwise. But "the land of the un-" isn't sitting still waiting for Belcourt and other queer NDNs to arrive (there is no "late," "early," or "on-time" there anyway), and it certainly isn't waiting, doesn't exist, for settlers. In a separate essay, Belcourt offers that queer Native intellectual production for those who are "in but not of Native Studies" are often "provocations of sorts to do things differently."[62] I think Belcourt's work can also serve as a provocation to white settler feminists aspiring to stretch beyond the binaries that constrain our imagined futurities and do things differently.

Like Belcourt, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Alderville First Nation) is not writing for settlers, but if we do the work, we can learn from her provocations about how we might resist American reproductive futurity. "We are peoples with reciprocal relationships of life, through which we have always ethically shared land, time, and space with plants, animals and other humans, stretching back to the past and reaching forward to coming generations."[63] This is a simple statement containing the unsettling of anthropocentrism (human/non-human), possession (mine/yours), and Western spatiality (here/there) and temporality (past/future). There is no right/wrong place and time, only channels of temporal and spatial interrelation flowing into, out of, over, below, alongside, with each other.

In a conversation with other disabled Indigenous creatives, Kera Sherwood-O'Regan (Kāi Tahu), a disabled Māori artist, said, thinking forward seven generations, she wants "story sovereignty, body sovereignty, and land sovereignty." For her, story sovereignty is about healing, affirming innate worth, and being proud. Body sovereignty includes "disabled bodies, fat bodies, Indigenous bodies, queer bodies." And land sovereignty is an end to the colonial

state, land back to Indigenous tribes, and not having to worry about land being eroded by climate catastrophe.[64] Long time/intergenerational time, emplacement, reciprocity, relationship and story weave through Simpson's and Sherwood-O'Regan's articulations.

Entering conceptualizations of futurity from a different direction, Alison Kafter asks her crip kin, "Can we tell crip tales, crip time tales, with multiple befores and afters, proliferating befores and afters, all making more crip presents possible?"[65] How might considering this influence our desires for more expansive reproductive justice frameworks, more liberatory all-inclusive futurities, far beyond "what's best for the children"? Stretching toward "reciprocal relationships of life" and "proliferating befores and afters" necessarily requires rejecting the violent binaries of white supremacist, settler colonial, capitalist, ableist, heteropatriarchal spacetime.

Building on this, we might consider temporal simultaneity, overlap, circuity, nonlinearity, haunting, multiple origins, generational time. We might consider spatial multiplicity, plurality, undeterminability, unchartability, dynamism, animacy, relation, desire. We might stretch toward horizons otherwise and beyond—that which is out of time and out of place. It is from those elsewhens and elsewheres, those somewheres/times and peopleplaces that alternative kinships, ancestors, other-than human relations live and thrive, refusing compulsory normative reproductivity and doing their own thing.

Acknowledgements:

This article would not have been published without the multiple reviews and support from my generous colleague, Susan Burch, and my partner, Dorrie Mazzone. I'm also incredibly grateful to the *Lateral* editors for seeing the potential in the piece and shepherding it through the peer review and production process. I'm appreciative of the thoughtful suggestions from those readers and for the attentive copy-editing of the revised article.

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Author Information

Judy Rohrer

Judy Rohrer is a theorist with research interests in a number of interdisciplinary fields: feminist studies, queer studies, Indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, critical race theory, and disability studies. She is currently director of Gender, Women’s & Sexuality Studies at Eastern Washington University. Rohrer has published articles in a number of scholarly journals and has published three books: *Staking Claim: Settler Colonialism and Racialization in Hawai‘i* (University of Arizona Press, 2016), *Queering the Biopolitics of Citizenship in the Age of Obama* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), and *Haoles in Hawai‘i* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010). She has also written op-eds for local and national media outlets.

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Article details

Judy Rohrer, "We Are Not (Yet) Nonbinary," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.3

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Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Affective Aesthetics: Mapping Visual Cultural Memories in the 2022 Anti-Zero-COVID Policy Protest in China

by Chelsea Wenzhu Xu | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT This article examines the meaning-making work of historical, cultural, and visual references in the 2022 anti-Zero-COVID policy protests in China. Characterized by homemade protest placards, the wave of 2022 grassroots protests were striking, typically citing well-known historical quotes, written in red paint, or the use of plain white paper. Using the frameworks of affect theory and analyses of visual culture, I draw attention to underexamined forms of Chinese cultural and visual traditions of protest, and address the following empirical questions: Which national visual cultural references are mobilized in this contemporary protest; how do people repurpose specific cultural idiosyncrasies to voice political dissent; and how do these references contribute to local political meaning-making and community-making? Via a qualitative analysis of such signs, this study identifies three types of cultural resources permissible by the state that became co-opted in the protests: 1) literature from anti-imperial times, 2) motivational slogans and symbols from the cultural revolution, and 3) the contemporary technique of censorship. These references are appropriated for the potential afforded by their recognizability, their affective function to articulate the political cause, and their ability to bypass censorship and generate communities across national and regional boundaries. Examining the A4 Revolution as a paradigmatic case, I argue visual historical citation holds significant aesthetic, affective, and political value, particularly in its capacity to mobilize the masses within undemocratic environments. The affective visuals used in the protests can be read as a performative, strategic, and psychosocial device of "critical inheritance from the bottom up," one that invites citizens to re-access cultural memory and critique the oppressive present.

KEYWORDS China, Cultural Revolution, critical inheritance, protest, visual culture

Aesthetics, Affect, Politics

In late November 2022, a surge of protests emerged across mainland China, against the draconian quarantine measures against COVID-19. These cases of civil uprising were dubbed the "A4 Revolution" or "White Paper Revolution" because people took to the street with conspicuous homemade signage—pieces of plain white paper, cardboard boxes with hastily composed writings, and iconographies of past revolutions—to convey their democratic messages. Through an analysis of these visual messages, I work toward a critical imagination of democratic potential in an authoritarian state. I aim to map out and reflect on how the historical, political, and cultural memories from the past inform the voices of the present. I theorize aesthetics as a distinctive memory medium and mobilizing strategy, one that is able to (re)present visions of the past and, more importantly, afford a language of dissent that otherwise would be unspeakable. As I will show shortly, the 2022 protest is culturally, semiotically, and affectively conditioned by the thoughts, feelings, and images that were previously approved, or even promoted, by the Chinese party-state. These literary and visual signs co-opt and recontextualize a unique Chinese cultural memory and political landscape that can strategically bypass immediate state censorship and facilitate progressive alliances that transcend generation and class.

Theoretically, I borrow Jacques Rancière's conception that aesthetic dimensions are central to democratic projects.[1] The aesthetic dimension constitutes the system of appearances and utterances that make up the political community. This is what he calls the "distribution of the sensible"—the organization of visibility and sayability within the social order, or police order. In other words, for Rancière, the notion of "the police" is the systems of organization that establish certain regimes of legibility and calibrate the distribution of bodies, roles, and speech acts that make up the consensual frames of perception within a political community. Meanwhile, *demos* exists in opposition to the police, disrupts the distribution of

the sensible, creates confrontational dissensus, and embodies the essence of democratic politics. Dissensus is, for Rancière, an aesthetically rooted political process that both disfigures and reconfigures the perceptual consensus of the social order. As he puts it, "Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only a place for noise."[2]

What Rancière's theory does not substantively engage with, however, is the affective dynamics and process that actually evoke disruption. Affect, as Gilles Deleuze reminds us, is a preconceptual intensity that acts as a force that animates potentialities between bodies across multiple social and institutional territories.[3] Informed by Deleuze, John Flatley concurs that artistic experience, such as literary imagery, is a site where affects become rearticulated and recontextualized in a disruptive way.[4] This incorporation of artistic experience and its affective potential has been taken up by Stephen Duncombe. Duncombe identifies an "artful" turn in democratic protest over the past two decades, a move away from the "march and rally" model. Protests, he observes, take on the *look* and *feel* of "celebratory carnivals with costumes, props, and performances" as a response to the global neoliberal hegemonic.[5] Inspired by his provocation, in this study, I explore how authoritarianism, like the global neoliberal hegemonic, relies on systems of meaning, comprehension, and legitimation. Therefore, it is sustained and, most importantly, could be dismantled by the flow of culture, images, signs, and symbols. Contemporary protests address this reality by using a corresponding strategy that employs mediated images of dissent to reveal injustice. These artful strategies prove to be particularly valuable within communication networks to affectively reach a broad audience. As the next sections will address, protesters of the 2022 movement are particularly invested in visually presenting their dissent via a certain *look* of their signage.

Furthermore, besides the artful dimension of the A4 Revolution, the movement introduces an additional layer to the protest's literary imagery, signs, and symbols: historical citation. In the wave of uprising, specific strategies were used to co-opt images and materials deemed permissible by the state. The commonly seen signage of the movement—anti-imperial writings, images of the Cultural Revolution, and a piece of white paper—are all technically part of Chinese people's routine repertoire; some are even endorsed by the state as important lessons of history. However, A4 protesters are able to repurpose and recontextualize this cultural imagery toward revolutionary ends in the twenty-first century. As Walter Benjamin reminds us, materialist historiography "does not choose its objects arbitrarily. It does not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession. Its provisions are more extensive, its occurrences more essential."[6] From this perspective, the uses of the visual and textual signs of the movement precisely show that historical citation, as a method, disentangles the historical object from its contextual constraints, rendering it legible and accessible to a wider audience for a new purpose. Historical imagery and memories are freed from their original context in order to facilitate reinterpretation but are also reconstructed as elements that are comprehensible to a broader audience. In undemocratic environments like today's China, where accessibility to historical narratives may be limited or controlled by the state, the strategic use of historical citation in the A4 Revolution becomes a powerful tool for mobilizing the masses, fostering emotional resonance, and carrying political significance.

Repurposing historical and cultural memories is politically significant, particularly in a Chinese context. Contemporary interpretations of historical events are shaped by conceptual and rhetorical frameworks that are inherently tied to the interests of specific groups.[7] The strategy to selectively omit, decontextualize, or distort past occurrences becomes particularly pronounced when the legitimacy of a regime or the pride of a nation is perceived to be at stake. The Chinese historical narrative is said to be particularly involved in this project because of its

association with authoritarianism, conventionality, cognitive rigidity, deference to authority, and traditionalism.[8] Zhang and Schwartz point to the state's "critical inheritance" practice by studying the state's framing of Confucius.[9] They argue that the state opens Confucius for reinterpretation without a wholesale acceptance of his doctrine; instead, his image is constantly recontextualized according to the state's agenda at a given time. These studies of historical citation and collective memory, however, are all concerned with the top-down ideological projects imposed by the authoritative state. There is a significant gap in understanding "critical inheritance" from the bottom up. What national visual cultural references are mobilized in contemporary protests? What affective functions do these historical visual references serve in the movement, arrangement, and distribution of the sensible? How do people repurpose specific cultural idiosyncrasies to voice political dissent? And how do these references contribute to local political meaning-making and community-making? The A4 Revolution is a case that participated in the critical inheritance from the bottom up, challenging and countering conceptualizations of the "official" uses of images and memories from the past.

Lastly, in examining the affective process's disruptive innerworkings in the anti-zero-COVID policy protest, I am mindful that relations are to be carefully mapped out within their historical and cultural specificity. Many scholars have extensively studied the Chinese party-state's crackdown on democratic protests and extreme surveillance on ordinary people and activists alike, especially in the digital age.[10] Despite some scholars' praise of the Chinese party-state's ability to adapt and respond to complex social contradictions,[11] being an activist in China means not only to voice dissent, but to take on the risk of long-term imprisonment, physical and psychological torture, and being made to "disappear."[12] Because of this, Chinese activists have been tasked with getting their message across while bypassing censorship and avoiding persecution, a "strategic protest." Deliberate framing, linguistic, and visual strategies are used to adjust contentious discourse, in order to protect the participants, preserve the movement, and achieve large-

scale mobilization.[13] The A4 Revolution, as I will demonstrate below, embodies a unique mix of an "artful protest" and a "strategic protest" to maximize the affective capacity of the visual and to protect the momentum of the movement. These practices were intentional and self-reflexive attempts to bypass and even mock the biopolitical authoritarian regime.

The A4 Revolution

In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in August 2020, conservative commentator and writer Hu Xijin suggested that the Uyghur region in China should be subject to more draconian quarantine regulations than others because of its history of East Turkestan dissent: "All cadres and masses in Xinjiang are paying the price for the struggle against terrorism, and they deserve the respect of mainlanders for this. Currently, it is difficult for Xinjiang to calculate the risks of COVID-19 calmly and meticulously like the mainland. The approach may seem a bit "extensive/rough" (*cu fang*) to outsiders. I think from a macro perspective, this is a sacrifice Xinjiang must make to contribute to the overall nation."[14] Although he does not explicitly explain the connection between historical Uyghur dissent and deserved more heavy-handed COVID-19 prevention measures, Hu ends his piece by promising that according to the experience of the mainland, the pandemic and the days of suffering in Xinjiang are coming to an end.[15] However, his prediction of the imminent expiration of Xinjiang's sacrifice did not come true. China's so-called "zero-COVID policy," in which whenever there is a positive COVID case, an epidemiological investigation is carried out to identify and isolate all persons who may have been in contact with the patient, persisted until early 2023.

Under this draconian regulation, on November 26, 2022, a fire in an apartment building in China's Xinjiang region killed 10 people and injured nine. The fire broke out in Jixiangyuan Community in the Tianshan District of Urumqi. Although the authority denies any correlation between the fire and COVID-19 quarantine

measures, the tragedy ignited a wave of public outcry as many residents in the area were forced to stay inside their apartment buildings. Screenshots of online chat records among the residents showed that the community had a positive COVID case during one of the routine test samplings, and thus was subject to "fenced-in" quarantine measures. Residents of the community were forbidden from leaving their apartment buildings, with the front doors sealed by governmental orders. There have been speculations that the barricade was what caused the three-hour-long delay in putting out the fire, since fire trucks could only spray water remotely.[16] China's Zero COVID Policy, at that moment, had been ongoing for nearly three years. Many stories of police brutality, mass confinement, and animal cruelty have been reported.[17] Just a little over a month ago on October 13, 2022, during the twentieth People's Congress, protester Peng Lifa was arrested soon after he hung two banners protesting Xi Jinping's COVID policy and authoritarian rule on Sitong Bridge in Beijing. However, his protest did not attract much attention within mainland China as it was quickly silenced.

On the last weekend of November, however, an unexpected "A4 Revolution" swept across China and gained widespread attention after the tragic fire. It started with the online circulation of a picture of a young college student holding a blank sheet of paper at Nanjing Communication University, which was quickly echoed by students from many universities to mourn the victims in Xinjiang and protest Xi's COVID policy. On November 27, citizens across the country joined the protests, breaking through the blockade and taking to the streets. Residents of different cities gathered on Urumqi Road (in China, streets are named after major cities in the nation. Many cities have a Urumqi Road) to mourn the victims and demonstrate their dissent.

The visual moments of dissensus represented in the A4 revolution serve as an instance for understanding the distribution of the sensible within contemporary Chinese politics. These moments are not only demonstrative of dissensus within authoritarian orders of perception, but also the strategic and affective elements of

dissensus rooted in Chinese political history and cultural memory. Aesthetic and affective function becomes a central concern of my project: how it looks, how it will be reproduced and distributed, and what sort of emotional resonance it will provoke. Through a qualitative analysis of such signs, I identify three loosely defined and sometimes overlapping types of cultural resources co-opted in the protests in order to provoke affective reactions: 1) motivational slogans and symbols from the Cultural Revolution 2) literature from anti-imperial times, and 3) contemporary techniques to mock and bypass state censorship.

Dazibao

The first type of affective visual sign used in the protests was hand-written or hand-painted red or black lettering over a large piece of white canvas. The font of the lettering is childlike, with bold strokes usually laid out in an unprepared manner. The characters on the sign are written as if the writers are in a hurry: they are not uniform in terms of size, often smeared in many places, and not aesthetically pleasing (see Figure 1). These large, striking signs with blood-like letterings resemble greatly the “Big Character Poster” (Dazibao,) during the Cultural Revolution era. The big character posters were prominently displayed handwritten posters containing complaints about government officials or policies during the 1950s and 1960s. Dazibao functions as a public spectacle, suggesting a failed leadership and a disillusioned community.[18] According to scholarship on Dazibao, the changes brought about by the development of big character posters not only added new forms to socialist democracy, but also served as a powerful weapon for the self-education of the masses.[19]

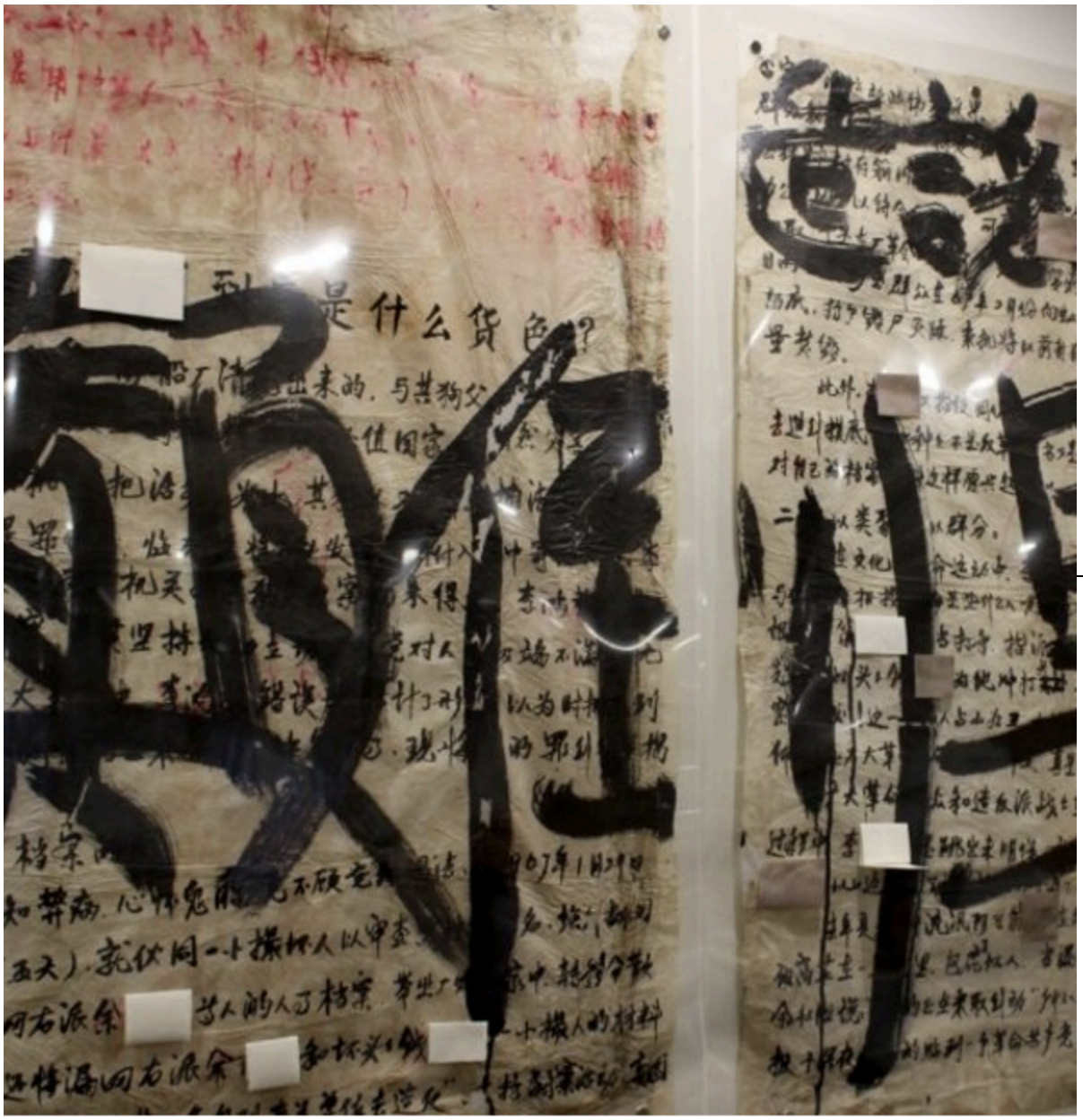

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Figure 1. Da Zi Bao from the 1950s.

Dazibao, written in the form of a wall poster, creates not a private space, but a democratically open, public space for criticism. Although Dazibao may incorporate poetry, comics, etc., its reception and aesthetic cannot be equated with highbrow literature and art. Traditional Chinese art and calligraphy are distinguished by their emphasis on the elasticity of time and space. These artistic forms often require viewing from multiple angles to convey a consistently

engaging experience. The technique of *liubai* or "leaving white space" is a crucial hallmark of canonical Chinese artistic practice. This technique aims to harmonize the composition of the artwork, preventing it from feeling overly crowded and reducing a sense of visual overwhelm. Liubai naturally guides the viewer's gaze toward the subject, demonstrating intentional planning of space on the canvas as a primary form of expression.

The Dazibao aesthetic stands in direct contrast to canonical Chinese art. Because it relies primarily on the viewing public's living space, the main objective of Dazibao is to attract attention and be easily readable. This led the Dazibao aesthetic to be inherently counter elitist. The appearance of Dazibao posters often incorporates bold strokes, inconsistent character sizes, and simple and even child-like fonts. The disorder, the appearance of being hastily written, and the conveyance of intense emotional states suggest a deliberate departure from established norms or dominant cultural and political canons. By rejecting the conventional norms of visual communication, Dazibao posters challenge prevailing elitist ideologies, making them a powerful tool for popular dissent and alternative expressions. This project, eliciting emotions and purposefully resonating with the masses, was one of the key foundations of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) successful mobilization of the masses.[20] Practices such as "speaking bitterness" (*suku*)—publicly displaying one's grievances to elicit empathy towards the speaker and anger towards those responsible for their hardship—are examples of how affective energy can be harnessed to political ends. As such, Dazibao provides a sensory and affective form of communication with the public through excess.

The 2022 protesters' citation in the contemporary time of Dazibao aesthetic, a form previously used to solidify the authoritarian state's rule, is a strategic citation of deeply embedded Chinese cultural memory, and one that is self-reflexive—a critical inheritance from the bottom up. The image of the hastily written, poorly organized characters functions at an iconographical level as it only involves a

basic cultural knowledge to recognize the image. No matter the reader's age, class, ethnicity, or gender, they are able to immediately identify this visual as a Dazibao, a form of public political writing associated with the Cultural Revolution. The use of Dazibao-esque aesthetic invokes the cultural memory of a chaotic and disorderly period in Chinese history. In this sense, the Dazibao aesthetic creates a mode of engagement that is extratextual and immediate, one that does not require close reading or mature literary and artistic taste; instead, it is designed to directly spur affect and compel instant judgment. It disrupts the orderly aesthetic of twenty-first-century China (see Figure 2) and offers a sense of democratically created disorder and chaos. The A4 Revolution strategically appropriates Dazibao aesthetics' affective capacity and visual immediacy: upon viewing, the masses across educational backgrounds are able to realize the message and derive feelings and affects generated by the sensorial stimuli.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture2.jpg>

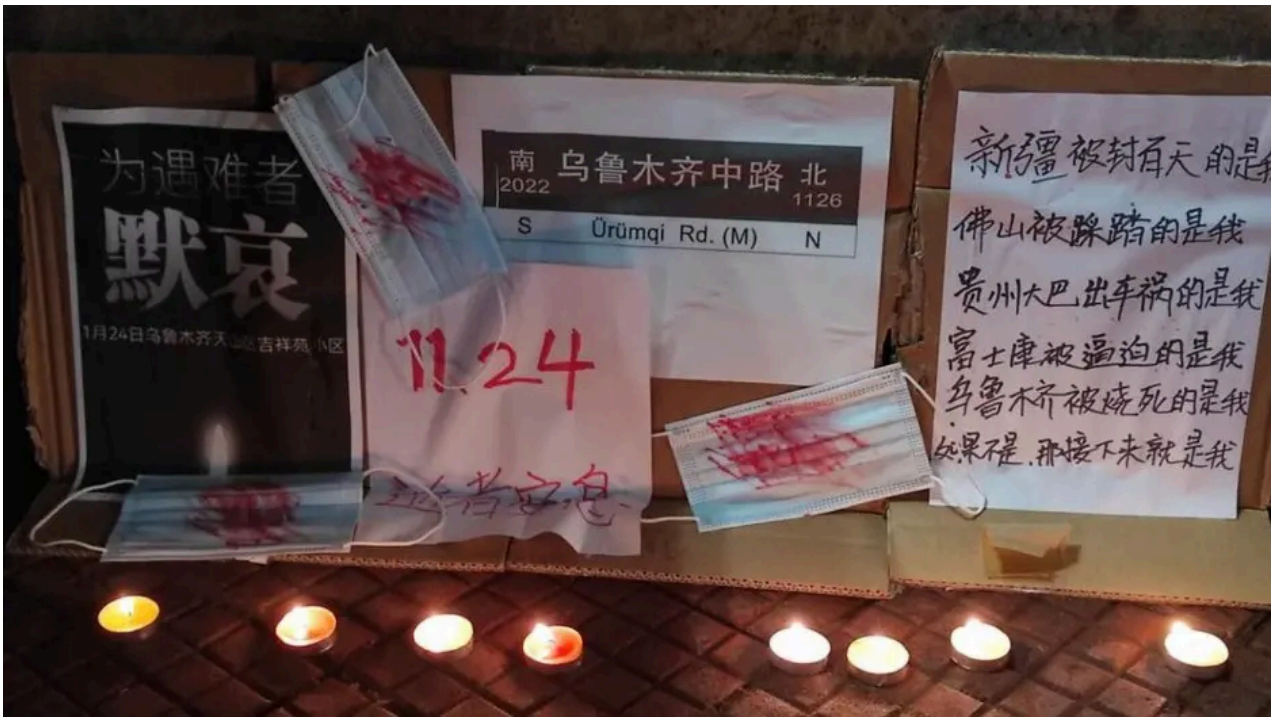
Figure 2. Typical street sign propagating Chinese socialist value.

Besides Dazibao's ability to provoke empathetic emotions from its viewers, it is also important to note that Dazibao was specifically born and widely used during the Cultural Revolution, a time of socialist fervor, class warfare, wrongful imprisonment, and nationwide poverty. Dazibao was initially meant to serve as a means of protest against governmental incompetence or corruption. The state used this technique as a way of soothing public dissent and thus stabilizing its rule. However, in practice, it became a way of persecuting the "political right" or the bourgeois and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, a time characterized by chaos, violence, and trauma. The legacy and memory of the revolutionary time largely reside in photographic images and other visual means, as the chaos and personal trauma were only experienced by people born before

the 1960s. The political past is less a matter of experienced social reality but is important because of the affective impact it has on people via visual references: the iconography and aesthetic of the red classics—Mao's portrait, the Red Army's uniforms, and big character posters (see Figures 3–8). The disruptive quality of Dazibao aesthetic at the moment of civil uprising lies not only within its descriptive textual context that calls for a free and just nation, but also in its viewers' desire to make sense of cultural trauma as it unfolds in the present time. Recycling such Dazibao aesthetics, the dissensus community evokes an unexpected and unnerving dimension to the current Chinese political landscape, one that, upon viewing, is reminiscent of the chaos and violence of the Cultural Revolution. The intensely emotional nature of the memory of the Cultural Revolution is further compounded by the use of blood-like paint on the signs, so as to make the viewing experience feel like a jarring and disconcerting disruption.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture3.jpg>

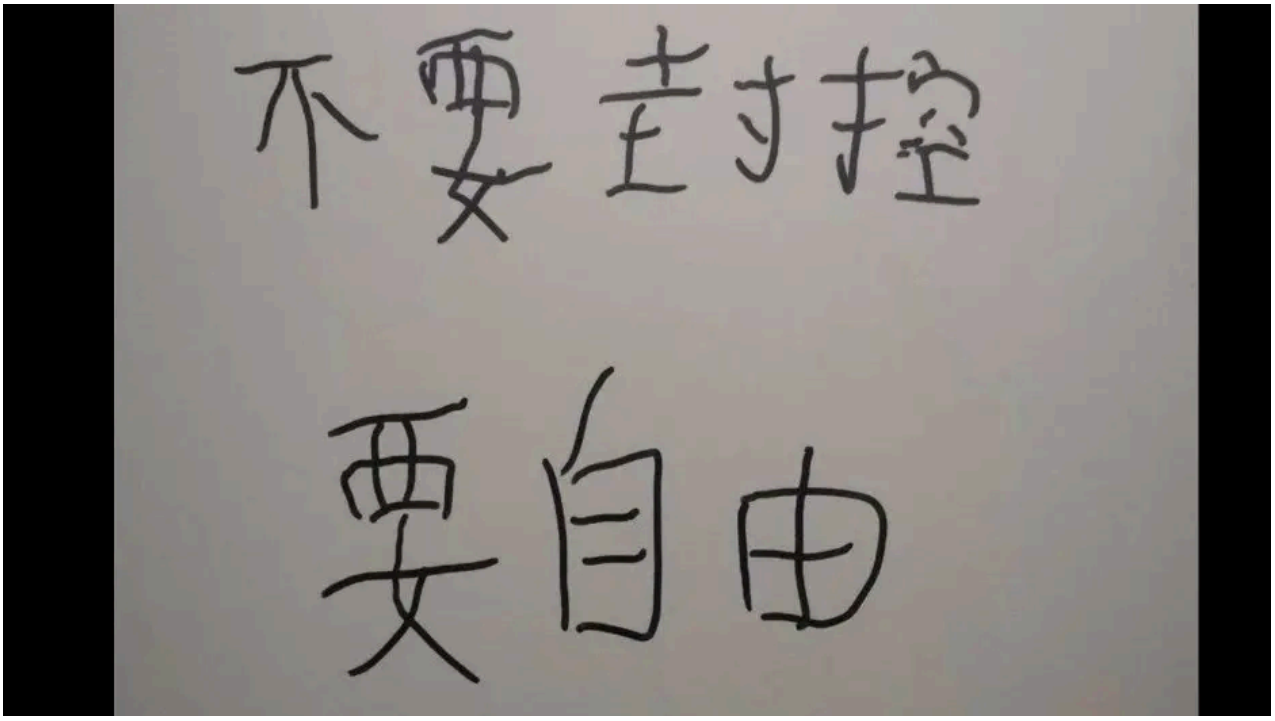
< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture4.jpg>



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture5.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture6.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture7.jpg>



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture8.jpg>

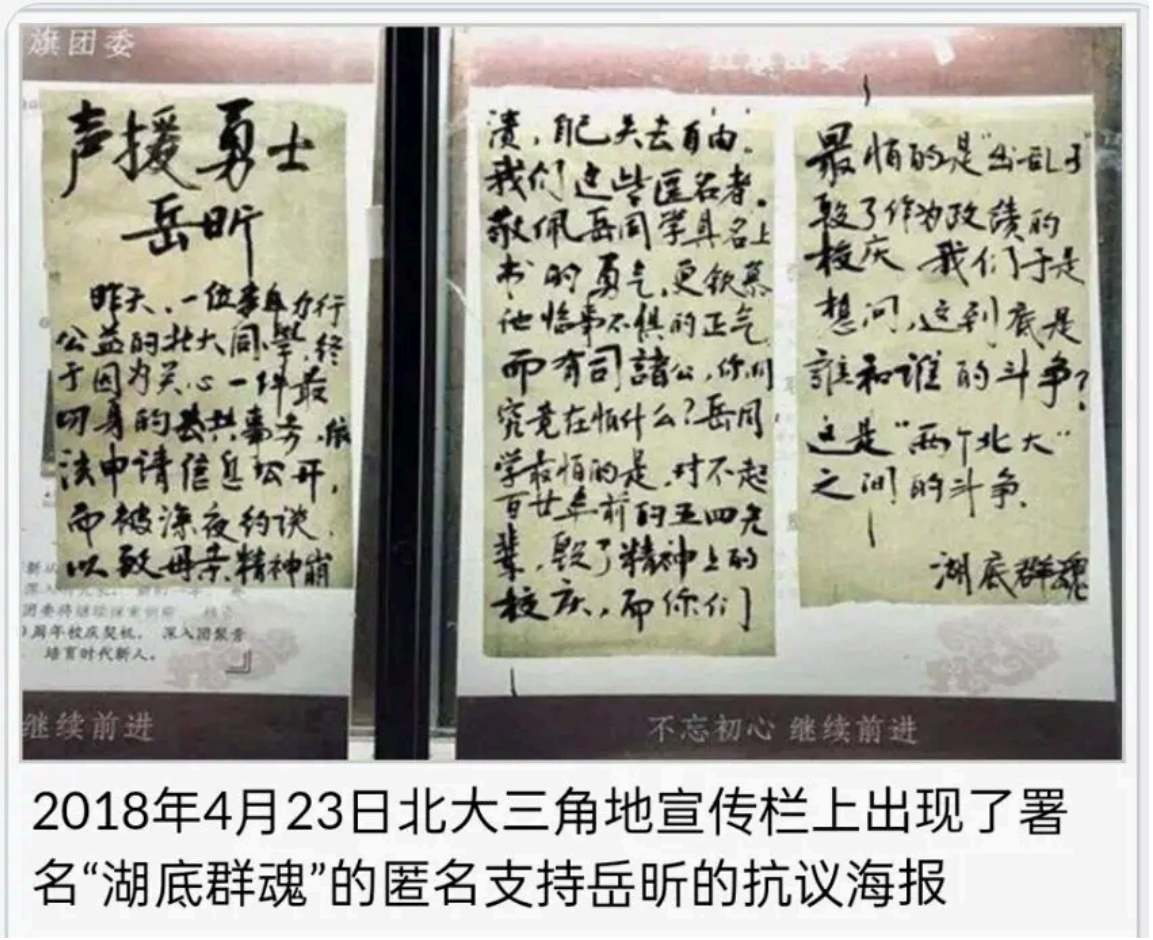
Figures 3–8. Signs from the Anti-Zero-COVID protest.

Internet users also showed a keen recognition and response to the Dazibao aesthetic by actively engaging in discussions and sharing similar visuals on online forums (see Figures 9–10). These pictures are often posted with very few words to accompany them. The act of citing visuals that align with the Dazibao style

serves as a unifying language, fostering a sense of shared purpose and solidarity among online communities. This digital iteration of the aesthetic not only transcends physical boundaries but also enhances the collective identity and communication among participants in the broader sociopolitical dialogue. Since the key force of the A4 Revolution is the young, educated urban population, appropriating visual references from an era of national trauma can effectively induce the strong viscerality of shock, dread, and anxiety among older generations and the working class, and forge communities across generational and class boundaries. This process is an illustrative instance of critical inheritance from the bottom up. Although Dazibao was primarily used by the CCP in the twentieth century as a means to manage public dissent and solidify the authoritarian state's rule, in its twenty-first-century citation, it instead serves as a medium for re-understanding the past, and reinterpreting in response to the present circumstances. Memory invoked by the Dazibao aesthetic is transformed into a counter-hegemonic cultural discourse in the present.

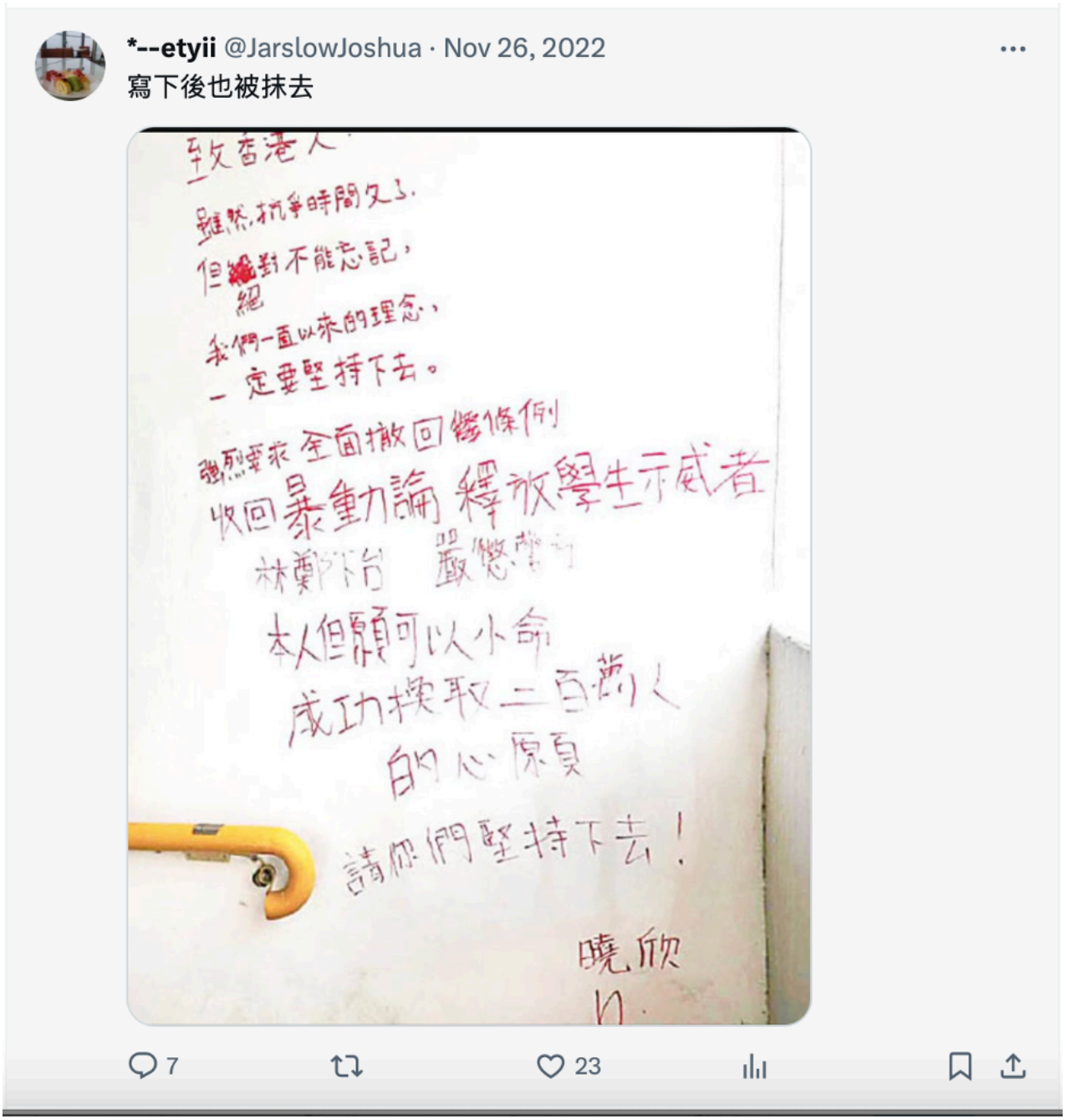
祁月 @FFkrB55HXx5DR9C · Nov 26, 2022

湖底群魂一直都在！



2018年4月23日北大三角地宣传栏上出现了署名“湖底群魂”的匿名支持岳昕的抗议海报

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture9.jpg>



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture10.png>

Figures 9–10. Online posts of Dazibao aesthetic.

Modern Literature from Anti-Imperial Times

The second type of affective visual signs is a repurposing of the anti-colonial literature and posters from the early twentieth century. Specifically, anti-imperial writing on personal freedom and liberty is frequently quoted. One of the most commonly seen signs during the protest originated in Liang Qichao's provocative pamphlet "On Liberty" (1902) (see Figures 11–12). Liang Qichao (1873–1929) famously reused American politician Patrick Henry's words, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" ( ]). Throughout the piece, Liang expresses a strong emotional commitment to the importance of individual autonomy, the right to free expression, and the freedom to pursue knowledge and truth, and that this freedom is essential to the development of a strong and prosperous society.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture11.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture12.jpg>

Figures 11–12. Signs with a quote from Liang Qichao: "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

The cover page of the *New Youth* magazine is also one of the popular visual signs during the protest (see Figure 13). *New Youth* was a Chinese literary magazine

founded by Chen Duxiu and published between 1915 and 1926. It strongly influenced both the New Culture Movement and the later May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Movement (1919) was characterized by a rejection of traditional Chinese values and a call for modernization, democracy, and social justice. The *New Youth* magazine was at the forefront of this movement, publishing articles and essays that criticized Confucian culture, advocated for the adoption of Western ideas and institutions, and called for social and political reform. One of the key emotions expressed by participants in the May Fourth Movement was frustration with traditional Chinese society and culture, particularly Confucianism. This frustration often manifested itself as anger, as participants in the movement criticized traditional Confucian culture and called for a radical transformation of Chinese society.

觉醒年代

庆祝中国共产党成立
100周年
优秀电视剧展播

新青年六大准则

1915年9月15日

他提出新青年的六条标准是：

以图从改变国民性入手，造就一代新青年

向传统孔教三纲宣战

他在发刊词中高举科学和民主两面大旗

第二年起，改名为《新青年》

1915年9月15日，陈独秀在上海创办了《青年》杂志

于和伟 / 饰 陈独秀

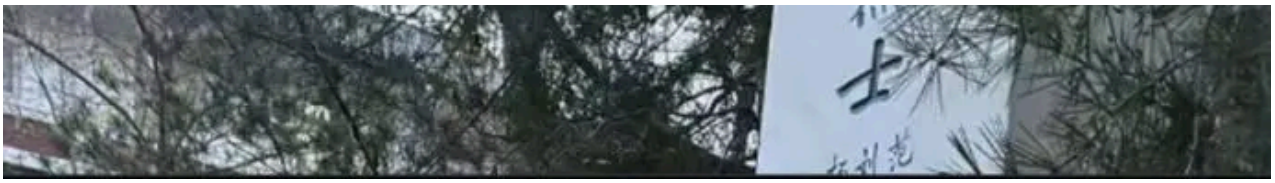
“科学的而非想象的，
实利的而非虚文的，
世界的而非锁国的，
进取的而非退隐的，
进步的而非保守的，
自由的而非奴隶的”

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture13.jpg>

Figure 13. Cover page of *New Youth* magazine.

During the protest, quotes from Lu Xun's 1918 "Diary of a Madman" ( ) and 1922 "Call to Arms" ( ) are often seen on signs. "Diary of a Madman" was the first and most influential work written in vernacular Chinese in Republican-era China (see Figures 14–16). The short story is riddled with excessive fear and paranoia, as the protagonist is consumed by a growing conviction that the people around him are plotting to commit cannibalism against him. As a critique and social commentary, the protagonists' fear, anger, and frustration are a metaphor for the madness of traditional Chinese culture and politics. Lu Xun (1881–1936) was one of the leading figures in left-wing political movements and a vocal critic of the ruling Nationalist government, and a symbol of Chinese resistance to oppression and exploitation. His writing is characterized by accessible language, heavy satire, and explicit outrage.

母校留念
先师鲁迅
（一九二零—一九二六年在我校任教）
七七级
七八级 全体同学 一九八二年九月敬立
二零零二年九月重立
青年



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture14.jpg>

Figure 14. A copy of the *New Youth* magazine is attached to a statue of anti-imperial writer Lu Xun.

他们会吃人，
将来未必不会吃我。

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture15.jpg>

<

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture16.jpg>

Figures 15–16. Two quotes from Lu Xun's writings: (left) "Diary of a Madman" (1918): "They eat people. Can't guarantee they won't eat me in the future," (right) "Call to Arms" (1922): "Sometimes I can't help shouting a few times, talking to comfort the warrior who is running in loneliness, so that he will not be afraid of going forward."

The anti-imperialists in the early twentieth century sought to replace the old-fashioned, pre-industrial glories of the Chinese empire with the industrial bourgeoisie's New China. Early modern Chinese literature was in turn motivated by the implicit and explicit goal to overhaul Confucianism and modernize Chinese people, thoughts, society, and ways of life by introducing Western ideas of democracy and science.[21] I do not intend to rehearse the abundant scholarship on early modern Chinese literature and its explicit and implicit connection with themes such as liberty, self-determination, science, and democracy. My interest,

rather, is the ways in which the writing of the imperial past is constructed with heightened senses of anger, shame, and indignation. After all, Lu Xun, the founding father of modern Chinese literature believed that only literature has the capacity to "spiritually stir people and move them to action."[22]

Emotional excess and the need to elicit mass affective reactions characterize anti-imperial writings. According to Haiyan Lee (2007), modern Chinese literature initially depicted grassroots society as emotionally detached (222). Lu Xun's work, for instance, primarily aims to cultivate a sentiment-driven sense of unity among Chinese individuals, transcending familial and local affiliations. His work sought to foster a universal, emotion-based identity, encouraging compatriots to empathize with anti-imperial efforts and connect on a broader scale.

The symbols and iconography of early twentieth-century anti-imperial movements used in the twenty-first-century protests are not just intended to assert a particular form of cultural identity, but also to give a tangibility to deeply held, antagonistic political views involved in the early twentieth century—a form of critical inheritance initiated by the populace. Beyond their symbolic and aesthetic meanings, the signs convey a particular memory of past behavior and feeling—the urgent need to wake up the masses from their emotional detachment and conjure up the power of popular dissent against authority. Early twentieth-century literature finds its parallel democratic purpose today. Over a hundred years later, in 2022, the literary references represent the memory of unexperienced events. As Morphy and Morphy remind us, collective memory is dynamic and shaped by cultural practices.[23] Rather than being a static repository, memories are actively worked on and adapted to suit present needs. The 2022 protesters use images of the past to draw parallel connections with the present, and the collective memory of the early twentieth century serves as a generator of meaning. The contemporary appropriation of these signs co-opts and re-engages the cultural memory of colonial indignation. The iconographies of Lu Xun, Liang Qichao, and *New Youth* magazine are extremely well-known within the Chinese standard

education system as essential parts of national history, collective memory, and cultural references. The quotes from “On Liberty” and “Diary of a Madman” have been a fundamental part of Chinese literary education, therefore not requiring extensive knowledge or nuanced reading to grasp their intended meaning. These images and quotes hold significant meaning and can evoke shared experiences, emotions, or ideas across generations. They work as immediate and almost automatic affective memory triggers, exerting impact based on the *feeling* it provokes, not the reading it enables. Upon viewing these references, viewers identify with the emotions situated within the cultural memory of anti-imperial struggles and are invited to make connections with the status quo. This is the critical inheritance protesters were engaged in—to inherit the affective dimension of these works, and most importantly, to critically draw parallels between the imperial past and authoritarian present as they both are ultimately concerned with similar problems: the harm done by undeserved privileges, economic and symbolic oppression, and freedom taken away by force.

Under the social media posts of these images of anti-imperial signs at the protest, Chinese netizens recognize the strategic nature of citing history (see Figures 17–18). They often reiterate the slogan “Give me liberty or give me death” in the comment sections. Internet users’ comments include “Just like this, we need to learn to protest smart” and “This sentence has been around for so long, now it finally is said out loud across the nation.”[24] Recycling these literary works and iconographies beyond the anti-imperial context becomes a moment of critical inheritance from the bottom up. Netizens demonstrate the ability to engage with and challenge established literary canons, extracting revolutionary energy and repurposing it for their own contemporary objectives. This act of repurposing serves as a form of cultural resilience, allowing individuals to reinterpret and adapt historical symbols and narratives to address current issues and express dissent or resistance. As Marx reminds us, revolutions “conjure up the spirits of the past to their service”—both of the two strategies elucidate the relationship between civil disobedience and national imaginings.[25] Both Dazibao and anti-imperial literature

aesthetic strategies in this protest draw on the affective dimensions by aiming to eliminate historical distance and draw connections between past and present. They achieve this by evoking a mood and atmosphere closely tied to the traumatic events and injustices of the twentieth century, while utilizing materials endorsed by the state.

JIANG @BZZY69 · Nov 26, 2022

1 1 29

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture17.png>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture18.jpg>

Figures 17–18. Two social media posts of an anti-imperial student movement at Peking University (left) and the cover of *New Youth* online with no additional caption (right).

A Piece of White Paper

Lastly, another affective visual sign of the A4 Revolution is the namesake, a blank sheet of A4 paper. Demonstrators around the world hold a piece of paper over their faces, sometimes wearing masks, to protest the party-state's violation of the freedom of speech (see Figure 19). Others posted white squares on their social media platforms (see Figure 20). As of May 2024, it remains unclear who was the first student at Nanjing Communication University to start holding white paper. According to the major information source on Twitter, dubbed Teacher Li (@whyyoutouzhele), the true identity of the initiator of the strategy is unknown.[26] Li Kangmeng, a protester who was arrested in Shanghai, has allegedly been the initiator; however, this information is not confirmed by any credible sources. The political force of the aesthetic itself is embodied in this blurring of speakers and their identities. The A4 Revolution, characterized by its ambiguous start and mask-wearing participants, is a truly faceless movement. The collective holding of white paper creates a "sensory reality that would abolish the very distance . . . between one speaker and another speaker." [27] This fosters a sense of collectivity among participants, as everyone is seen as part of a unified community rather than as individuals with varying backgrounds or statuses. It allows people from diverse backgrounds to come together and express solidarity, reinforcing a shared identity based on the issue at hand. Further, in an environment where political dissent is met with persecution or legal consequences, anonymity shields individuals from being easily targeted or identified, creating a sense of support, comfort, and empowerment among participants.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture19.jpg>

Figure 19. The A4 Revolution.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture20.jpg>

Figure 20. In the Nintendo game Splatoon 3, some players express their support and opinions by presenting a white square in the game.

Perhaps the piece of white paper also cites the common internet slang "I'm being 404'd." Error 404, an issue indicating the requested URL cannot be found on the server, accompanied by a glaringly white empty webpage, has become a codeword for Chinese censorship of the internet (see Figure 21). When scandals or misdeeds become exposed online, "404" becomes a tool for the state to manage public opinion and public relations by simply taking the information down from the internet. To "404" someone is a powerful course of action exclusively controlled by the state: the watchful eye and omnipotence to suppress all competing sources of information work to cement CCP's rule. However, protesters in the A4 Revolution critically inherit "404" from the bottom up, reclaiming the right to "404." Beyond affording a certain level of anonymity and protection, the protester's holding of "404" symbols becomes an aesthetic because of the critical reflection involved in this visual. It plays the role of "a transformation of a certain state of relations between words and things, between

words and the visible, a certain organization of the senses and the sensory configuration of what is given to us and how we can make sense of it."[28] A blank page, with no textual information beyond telling the viewer that the content they seek no longer exists, intentionally makes a mockery of the state's elusive yet paranoid governing of speech. The simple visual of a piece of white paper over one's face forms a community of dissensus comprised of those who have experienced being deprived of political discussions by means that go beyond linguistic availability. Although without any words, this aesthetic sarcastically asks the question: why are you afraid of a blank sheet of paper? And it gives the answer: whatever you are afraid of is what is written on the paper (see Figures 22–23).

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture21.png>

Figure 21. 404 error code for a webpage that has been taken down.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture22.jpg>

Figure 22. A protester holding a piece of white paper that reads, “You know what I’m saying.”

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Picture23.png>

Figure 23. A piece of white paper that reads, “What on earth is so scary about a piece of blank paper?”

In this way, the piece of white paper is profoundly strategic and satirical, “a new way of dealing with words—with words and meanings,” because no word needs to be said.[29] This aesthetic is, on the surface, completely muted and silent, but is able to convey democratic messages loud and clear. Moreover, this mode of

expression is remarkably accessible, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. Participation is not confined to physical spaces or specific moments; it extends to anyone, anywhere, and at any time. Beyond the demonstrators physically holding plain papers on the streets, many online communities embraced a virtual iteration by sharing blank white squares in digital spaces (see Figure 20). The simplicity of this blank visual requires minimal language, yet it encapsulates profound emotions. Filled with frustration, anger, and contempt, the piece of white paper is configured by the mutual understanding between the public and the authoritarian regime about the unsayable message. The affects, feelings, and embodied responses are experiences that are forced out of precise verbal articulation within contemporary Chinese citizens' everyday discourse. They exist in a realm that does not allow a linguistic expression, thus remaining somewhat ambiguous or challenging to capture fully in words. The task of dealing with this deeply felt indignation of being "404'd" is typically relegated to the privacy of the individual. A single post being taken down, a comment being deleted, a beloved website being no longer available, these common 404 encounters are usually limited to the individual and their mobile device. However, by publicly visualizing this collective vulnerability in everyday spaces—whether online or in person—the white papers carry a profound affective power. They became a language and resource for political solidarity and community formation, highlighting shared experiences and fostering a sense of community in these alienating "404" moments. The state's "404" measures were intended to disband communities, yet the A4 Revolution's aesthetic critically inherited these visuals, repurposing them to construct anti-authoritarian communities. This innovative use of the "404" symbol transforms a tool of suppression into a rallying point for collective resistance, demonstrating the power of creative reinterpretation of symbols to foster solidarity and unity among those challenging authoritarian regimes. As Rancière reminds us, politics is largely a struggle over visibility: over what and who can be seen, and in what ways. The moment the state started to censor blank paper, the paranoia and irrationality of its rule were exposed and a

redistribution of the sensible took place. Demonstrating with the paper thus represents a strategic disruption of the hegemonic representational logic that is self-reflexive, pragmatic, and political. It renders visible the schema of visibility and sayability under the police order of the authoritarian regime, affectively reconfigures the social order by appropriating, mocking, and revealing the hegemonic violation against citizens' rights and the material and social violence that they conceal.

Conclusion

A month after the Anti-Zero-COVID Protests, China ended its anti-COVID measures and reopened its door to the world. The debate over the contribution of the A4 revolution to this dramatic policy change is still ongoing. Some believe the protesters were successful in forcing the state to comply with its people,[30] while others think the economic downturn determined that the reopening was inevitable regardless.[31] After all, the authoritarian party-state holds absolute control of violence. Protesters are arrested and interrogated, and some may never be seen again, while Xi and his CCP remain untouchable by the civil uprising. However, the 2022 protests were still a historic occurrence under Xi's iron fist rule because of their scale and depth. In their extensive review of the post-Tiananmen protests and their scholarship, Yen-Hsin Chen and T. David Mason (2023) demonstrate that there are three unique features: first, they are not national, small in scope, motivated by disputes over local issues; second, their demands are tangible and material, rather than political; third, they are usually spearheaded by peasants and workers, instead of student-led. However, the A4 Revolution is a nationwide and international movement that impacted at least twenty-one provinces in the country and overseas.[32]

Major cities, starting with Nanjing and Shanghai, followed by Beijing, Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Shenyang, Harbin, Changchun, Chongqing, Chengdu, Lanzhou,

Hangzhou, Xi'an, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, Dali, Changsha, Jinan, Taiyuan, Urumqi, Lhasa, Foshan, and Zhuhai, all witnessed waves of street protests organized by students. Their goal was not only material—to speak against their mass confinement in the name of COVID and regain their physical freedom—but it was also distinctively *political*: to sympathize with their fellow minority Chinese citizens and to question Xi's and the Party's authoritarian rule. The A4 Revolution is explicit in its discontent with the party's and Xi Jinping's rule (see Figures 24 and 25). On the evening of November 26, 2022, Shanghai citizens protested on Urumqi Middle Road, calling for the CCP and Xi Jinping to step down.[33] Particularly among Chinese diasporic communities, the signs demanding the end of authoritarian dictatorship were circulated on social media, inviting a "public gaze, serving as a mode of aesthetic communication not only with a national but also with a global audience."[34] Perhaps inviting a global audience to witness the protest is a strategy to archive the movement, a way to not be completely wiped off and wither away, though the effectiveness of it remains uncertain. Since the hashtag #WhitePaper (*baizhi*) was quickly censored on Weibo, the A4 Revolution heavily relied on Twitter to circulate images of dissent and evidence of police brutality. As some protesters were arrested and interrogated, the survivors of the protest started a Twitter account (@whitepaper_op) in the hope of reuniting with previously lost participants, continuing to pass on the spirit of the movement, and realizing democratic aspirations in mainland China.[35] The account now circulates images and information not exclusively regarding anti-COVID measures, but anti-CCP discourse at large, including memorializing the 1989 protest victims, Hong Kong independence, and exposing ethnically motivated persecution, etc. Although the protests waned after the reopening of the country, the piece of white paper has morphed into a symbol of dissent against Xi Jinping and his rule.

In this sense, the A4 Revolution defies all three categorical features of post-Tiananmen protests, making it a historically distinctive and therefore significant case to study at the current historical conjuncture in China. The movement is unique in its strategic mobilization of visual cues with Chinese historical and

cultural specificities. These simple yet striking visual signs critically recontextualize and reinterpret history and political reality, tapping into the affective energy of well-known stories and inspiring fresh political visions and possibilities. New perspectives, democratic voices, and previously suppressed narratives are afforded a newfound language and are able to come to the forefront. They enabled the community to emerge as an identifiable political subject through the traumatic history of colonialism and misguided socialism. These affective aesthetics are important disruptive forces of critical inheritance from the bottom up: they disfigured the distribution of perception by making visible the similarity between the current historical conjuncture and times of national trauma. These protests offer a valuable epistemology to delimit "spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience."[36] Via affective and aesthetic dissensus, the wave of protest in China created a new form of communication and community across class lines, a new way of being in the face of authoritarianism, and thereby a new "distribution of the sensible." Both artful and strategic, the protests critically inherit materials that were deemed permissible by the Chinese state, be it blank paper, canonical literature, or imaginaries common in history books, and reconfigure them into taboos that need to be censored. The A4 Revolution serves as a compelling reminder that aesthetics is a distinct medium of cultural memory and a mobilizing strategy to (re)present visions of the past and the political present. It is a crucial, self-reflexive, and strategic language crafted by the populace to articulate democratic demands within authoritarian settings, affording the transformative power of visual symbols and creative expression in shaping collective resistance.

Notes

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Author Information

Chelsea Wenzhu Xu

Chelsea Wenzhu Xu is a doctoral candidate in Cultural Studies at George Mason University. She earned her MA in English at the University of Rochester, and her BA in English from Ocean University of China. Growing up in China as a first-generation college student, she is interested in common Chinese people’s everyday cultural life. Her research focuses on the visual culture, contemporary media consumption, and the interplay between authoritarianism, neoliberalism, and (anti)feminism in China. Her dissertation explores the recent phenomenon of “big heroine [*da nvzhu*]” in contemporary Chinese popular culture.

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Article details

Chelsea Wenzhu Xu, "Affective Aesthetics: Mapping Visual Cultural Memories in the 2022 Anti-Zero-COVID Policy Protest in China," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.4

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

1980—Neo-Marxism, Feminism, and Post-Colonialism at the Dawn of a New Decade of Cultural Studies

by Sebastiaan Gorissen | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024), Years in Cultural Studies

ABSTRACT Tested against the global political struggles of feminist and anti-colonialist activists, cultural studies scholarship during the 1970s shifted from the subversion of humanist and empiricist dichotomies to the problematization of the limits and possibilities of postmodern critical knowledges themselves. Arguing for analyses that acknowledge the persistence of hierarchical systems and structures—such as neo-imperialism, and the persistent division of labor by sex—as social relations and subjectivities have become more individualized, fragmented, and unstable, we may recognize the year of 1980 as the symbolic moment cultural studies scholars would particularly problematize the categories, oppositions, and dichotomies on which conventional notions of race and sex rely. This article chronicles some of the key debates coming to a head over the course of the late 1970s which would prove fundamental to the development and continued importance of the cultural studies project over the course of the 1980s.

KEYWORDS Marxism, Reaganomics, Thatcherism, feminism, postcolonialism

"Ronald Reagan? The actor?!"

—Doc Brown, *Back to the Future* (1985)

Introduction

The year 1980 marked a turning point across the Western world, characterized by the beginning of the Reagan era in the United States of America and the first full year of the Thatcher era in the United Kingdom. The landslide election of the Republican ticket of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush in the forty-ninth United States presidential election set off an ongoing rise of conservatism and signaled the start of the Reagan era in 1980. As crises across the 1970s—including defeat during the Vietnam War, the rise of Soviet power, the deindustrialization of the Rust Belt, soaring inflation, and the energy crisis[1]—eroded American voters' confidence in liberal policies, socially progressive causes such as the gay rights movement, feminist protests, and the Equal Rights Amendment encouraged the reactionary rise of the religious right. Across the pond, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1979, implementing broad economic and social reforms—including the privatization of many nationalized industries and the weakening of trade unions—in an effort to reduce the government's stranglehold on the free market. As over two million British manufacturing jobs were lost in the recession of 1979–1981,[2] Thatcher's hardline monetarist policies, cuts to public spending, and unwillingness to compromise with unions aggravated the liberal conservatives within her Conservative Party.

Over the course of this tumultuous decade, significant cultural studies scholarship was concerned with questions of power, and through the construct of *hegemony*, analysts sought to explicate its machinations. In the United Kingdom, this scholarship was largely conducted within the context of an Althusserian Marxism, at its core motivated by the phenomenon of social class. Building upon the (neo)Weberian notion of class popularized by a generation of British sociologists writing during the 1950s and 1960s, subsequent generations of scholars would turn to Marx in their explorations of popular, social working-class

culture, paying mind to the class power on display in trade unions and on factory floors.[3] As the "power as hegemony" position continued to gain momentum throughout the 1970s, moving its focus increasingly away from labor and the economy towards ideology and culture, scholars would come to recognize power as not solely economic, but also cultural. Capitalist state power could not be conceptualized solely as coercive and dominating: it was to be understood as working through internalized consent, as a product of ideology.

Engaging with the works of Gramsci at the turn of the decade, scholars would come to underline the importance of consent and culture over the course of the 1980s. Recognizing alliances of the working class with sections of the middle classes, Gramscian cultural studies scholars conceptualized a counter-hegemonic culture that opposed the dominant culture and held the potential to aggregate the alliance of different classes. As Reagan and Thatcher fortified their positions of power in the 1980s, cultural studies scholars across the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and the United States would turn to the field of semiotics and the works of Lacan to analyze their regimes through the lens of authoritarian populism, which would accelerate the "power as hegemony" position's turn to the consideration of cultural and social factors alongside economic inequalities. As Krieger noted, "throughout many of the capitalist democracies in Western Europe and in North America, the recession that began with the sharp rise in petroleum prices in 1973–74 signaled an epochal shift in the patchwork of growth-based economic and social policies."[4] Exacerbated by the reluctant entrance of female authors into the literary canon and the decolonization of global culture at the end of the 1970s, cultural studies scholarship's engagement with the ever-present struggle for women's equality and the machinations of Eurocentric power relations amongst communities called for a profound restructuring and reconceptualization of the power relations between social and cultural groups. During this time of tremendous social, cultural, and economic upheaval, the global cultural studies project was

necessitated to change with the times or risk academic obsolescence at the dawn of a new decade.

The State of Cultural Studies in 1980

Whereas the foundations of the peculiar interdisciplinary project that would come to be known as “cultural studies” cannot reasonably be traced to a singular individual or a single group of scholars, it didn’t come into being in a vacuum, and much may be gained from closely considering the academic landscape of the United Kingdom after World War II. By the mid-1950s, universities across the United Kingdom were expanding their admission processes beyond considerations of class, wealth, and ancestry, making meaningful strides towards greater inclusion based on talent and ability. Leftist intellectuals would come to herald “the culture and sensibilities of industrial workers,” and seek to understand the various intersections of class and nation at the levels of lived experience and social structure.[5] Answering Leavis and Thompson’s call for the development of critical awareness through the study of advertisements, newspapers, and films,[6] Hoggart championed the literary study of the popular pursuits of the working classes.[7] Lamenting the loss of an authentic working-class popular culture in the United Kingdom and denouncing the imposition of a mass culture through advertising, media, and “Americanization,” Hoggart incrementally transformed literary studies towards an early social science. This interest in the study of the popular pursuits of the working classes marked a fundamental departure from the common, established canon of the traditional humanities and social science disciplines, and led to the founding of Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964.

This movement of reformation would continue throughout the 1960s, strengthened by the establishment of universities in academically underserved communities across the country. This period of growth, popularity, and prosperity

would become the central impetus behind the adolescence of cultural studies, marking the project as a revolutionary curricular alternative to the traditional humanities and social science disciplines. Thompson approached social history with a humanist perspective, critiquing those historians reducing the working classes to an inhuman, statistical mass.[8] Instrumental in disassociating Marxism from Stalinism, Thompson sought to steer the United Kingdom's Left towards democratic socialism rather than totalitarianism.

Later, in the 1970s, moving against the idealist conceptions of culture as a march towards perfection, Williams argued for critical scholarship focusing on the shared values and ways of life of particular communities at particular times.[9] Building upon Marx's argument that people unconsciously constitute their own conditions of existence,[10] Williams's methodology of cultural materialism urged the engagement of culture by reading its products and considering their circumstances of creation and circulation.[11] Predominantly interested in the social nature of culture, and the cultural nature of society, Williams continuously underlined the importance of community life, as well as the conflicts arising in any cultural formation. Contemporaneously, Hall ushered in the Centre's most revered period of collaborative, engaged Gramscian scholarship.[12] Under Hall's directorship at the Centre during its formative phase from 1968 to 1979, scholars sought to approach social history with a humanist perspective, critiquing those historians reducing the people of the working class to an inhuman, statistical mass.

Significantly, the roots of the interdisciplinary project of cultural studies were defined not by particular problems or subject matters, but rather by a conceptualization of fields of academic specialization remaining in constant dialogue with intellectual and practical interests beyond themselves.[13] As Williams argued—as did Hoggart before him—the actuality of regional, class-based experiences was principally excluded.[14] In this context, the impetus for interdisciplinarity may be traced to the perceived incompleteness of the academy.

This perceived incompleteness rose to the scholarly fore over the course of the 1970s, cumulating by the end of the decade in attempts to broker and fortify cultural studies' relationship to sociology, communication, and media studies by analyzing the signs, representations, and ideologies at the heart of popular cultural stratification.[15] This culmination coincided with one of the most impactful changes of the guard within the Centre, as its director Stuart Hall—possibly its most widely recognizable alum—left the University of Birmingham and was succeeded by Richard Johnson in 1980.

Continuing his career at the Open University with a shift towards Foucauldianism and the postcolonial, Hall would become a leading influence on cultural studies scholarship in the United States over the course of the 1980s by fortifying cultural studies' relationship to sociology and media studies. In the wake of World War II, the American mass communication tradition became a social-scientific enterprise shaped by emerging functionalist research objectives to measure media effects, which would result in both a professionalization of mass communication research, as well as a positivist sociological understanding of mass media. Bolstered by members of the Frankfurt School emigrating from Nazi Germany to the United States, the American social science research tradition was introduced to a decidedly Marxist formulation of theory. Underlining the importance of considering the historical character of mass culture and problematizing the potential division between the individualistic values of mass culture consumption vis-à-vis sociopolitical realities,[16] this critical reconfiguration of mass communication and media studies elevated the theoretical discourse in the United States by pressing communication scholars to confront the undemocratic character of mass culture and to acknowledge and overcome the possible collusion of research with the dominant political and economic system.

Since the 1970s, the integration of the cultural studies project into the fields of communication and media studies has been fundamentally colored by a certain politics of legitimation, which hinged on the ill-defined, controversial term

“culture.” Simultaneously operating as a geographic/historical location (“a culture”), a methodological approach (“cultural studies work”), and a theoretical approach (“cultural theory”), the terms “culture” and “cultural studies” over the course of the decade came to function as broad signifiers across the project and the world, warranting further specification before application. Appadurai later recognized these debates raging during the 1970s regarding cultural studies as revealing an “overdetermined landscape of anxieties,” defined—tongue firmly placed in cheek—as an “omnibus characterization about its ‘theory’ (too French), its topics (too popular), its style (too glitzy), its jargon (too hybrid), its politics (too postcolonial), its constituency (too multicultural).”[17] As a solution to what he perceived to be an incompleteness of the academy, Appadurai insisted on the inclusion of the “minoritarian” as part and parcel of an academic education, in the form of “area studies along with anything that might count as ‘minors,’ ‘minorities,’ and ‘minor literatures.’”[18] Ultimately sarcastic in tone, Appadurai nevertheless indicated clearly the roots of the cultural studies project’s continued caricature by its opponents. At the heart of this ongoing caricature, Hall argued, lies the fact that the foundational work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies produced “no single, unproblematic definition of culture.”[19] Rather, the Centre operated with a propensity to avoid offering up any definitive definition or methodologically suggestive view of what constitutes “culture,” in its stead functioning as “a convergence of interests.” As Hall summarized, the specificity of cultural studies scholarship arose over the course of the 1970s in its contingent location, its flexible positions, and its self-reflexivity.

In this article, I will chronicle some of the key sub-disciplinary debates coming to a head over the course of the late 1970s, which were fundamental to the development and continued importance of the cultural studies project. Particularly, I will consider the debates regarding the criticality of cultural studies scholarship vis-à-vis the debates regarding the incorporation of feminist and postcolonial perspective across the sub-disciplinary borders of the cultural studies project, culminating in key publications by Laclau and Eagleton, Cixous

and Kristeva, and Hall and Said, which would prove informative of how the project would develop over the course of the 1980s.[20] To come to a closer understanding of the state of cultural studies in the year of 1980, we must first turn our attention to the differing neo-Marxist perspectives on hegemony, class, and power characterizing the cultural studies scholarship of the late 1970s.

Divergent Schools of Neo-Marxist Thought

The cultural studies project has been concerned with questions of power since its inception, and through the construct of "hegemony" analysts have sought to explicate its machinations. Building upon the neo-Weberian notion of class popularized by a generation of British sociologists writing during the 1950s and 1960s, a new generation of scholars would turn to Marx in their explorations of popular, social "working class" culture, paying particular mind to the class power on display in trade unions and on factory floors.[21] Over time, cultural studies as practiced at the CCCS would turn to the consideration of "the repressed," motivated by "the rediscovery of ideology."[22] As the late 1970s moved into the early 1980s, scholars across Europe and the Americas worked to reconceptualize Marxist theory, challenging both "official Marxism" and the contemporary, "bourgeois" traditions of the social sciences.

Forwarding the maxim that the media do not reflect, but rather construct, "reality," scholars at the Centre would come to strongly (re)condemn positivistic traditions in media studies for neglecting any theorization of power, and for erroneously presuming the media to organically facilitate an integral "consensus." These theoretical contributions would formally introduce to the cultural studies project a neo-Marxist framework built upon a specific, radical ideological critique. Building upon traditions of interpretive sociology,[23] renewed attention was paid to the critical concept of "deviance" within hierarchical societies. Scholars at the CCCS

would turn to the works of Barthes and Lukes to construct a model of consensus creation driven by mythologized power[24]—a model which, significantly, would foreshadow the importance of Foucauldian models of power and consensus production over the course of the 1980s. Resultantly, this period of ideological critique indicated a bold intellectual, political commitment to the reconceptualization of "culture" as a site of class struggle, hegemonic formation, and structural signification.[25] This sub-disciplinary debate would influence—and be influenced by—scholars across the project.

By the end of the 1970s, cultural studies scholarship as practiced at the CCCS was largely conducted within the context of an Althusserian Marxism, at its core motivated by the phenomenon of social class.[26] Within this context, Laclau argued adamantly against the "taxonomic" class reductions pervasive in such scholarship, problematizing the facile paradigms of (perceived) bourgeois social scientists: "theoretical practice has been greatly hindered by the connotative articulation of concepts at the level of common-sense discourse and their rationalist articulation into essential paradigms."[27] In its stead, Laclau called for "an increasingly theoretical formalization of Marxist categories," as contemporary Marxist analysis had made redundant "the complexity of fascism and [has] reduced it to a single contradiction: that existing between monopoly capital and the rest of society."[28] The author, here, aligned himself more clearly with the Centre's earlier efforts at a Gramscian analysis of popular struggle rather than its Althusserian Marxist successor.[29]

Moving emphatically against the "process of pronouncing the class belonging to elements of concrete ideologies," Laclau argued that the reflexive class reductionism of Marxist scholarship had overlooked the critical insights of the work of Arendt.[30] According to Laclau, "it was not interpellations as a class but interpellations as 'people' which dominated fascist political discourse."[31] As the Marxist analysis and political practice characteristic of the 1970s failed to recognize the simultaneous struggle of classes on separate ideological planes—

as an ideological rhetorical construction, and as a people—the "working class" had come to function as a class barrier in the United Kingdom and across Western Europe, yielding the "arena of popular-democratic struggle" to the "monopoly fraction" of the petit bourgeoisie.[32] The author explicated the ways in which popular democratic interpellations do not share a necessary class belonging, even as democratic struggle is fundamentally dominated by class struggle, rejecting the sterile formalism of past Marxist theory and praxis and positing a "theory of the specific autonomy of popular democratic interpellations" as an absolute necessity.[33]

Contemporaneously, Eagleton moved against the critiques of Marxist theory forwarded by his peers, which accused this "communist" approach of favoring politics over theory, history over aesthetics, and content over form.[34] Criticizing those developing a leftist version of humanist criticism rather than adopting the "revolutionary" Marxism promoted by Althusser, Eagleton proposed a structuralist account of texts' modes of production and consumption. Whereas "idealist" criticism only provides a subjective, intuitive sense of value of canonical art, Eagleton argued, Marxist criticism can provide an objective account as Marxism provides a science of literary value. The author, here, worked to explicate the historical atrocities committed in the name of capitalism, as "modern capitalist nations are the fruit of a history of slavery, genocide, violence and exploitation every bit as abhorrent as Mao's China or Stalin's Soviet Union." That is not to say that capitalism is void of leading to meaningful contributions to society; as Eagleton underlines, its heritage of democracy, civil rights, and feminism must not be overlooked, in spite of its "history of slumps, sweat-shops, fascism, imperial wars and Mel Gibson." On the other hand, the meaningful contributions of Marxism—"cheap housing, fuel, transport and culture, full employment and impressive social services for half the citizens of Europe"—similarly warrant recognition.[35] As Eagleton continuously highlighted, Marx strived for a future of diversity, not uniformity. Socialism would bring about a deepening of democracy, not an abrogation of it. Elaborating Macherey's distinction between texts'

aesthetic forms vis-à-vis their ideological representations,[36] Eagleton cemented the formal methods of the critic as revealing the influences of ideology on a text's production; an influence which may take multifarious forms, beyond explicating such gaps and distortions.

While Eagleton pursued a narrowly focused engagement with the traditions of literary criticism, rather than an engagement with the ongoing project of cultural studies, this complex view gave formal methods a critical import that would resonate across the project. In this endeavor, Eagleton turned to the critical philosophies of the Frankfurt School, signaling the significance of a critical neo-Marxist paradigm for the fields of communication and media studies, particularly, across the United Kingdom and the United States over the course of the following decade. Essential works in communication and media studies were prompted to question the emancipatory potential of public communication reconceptualized as commercial culture, as well as a shared arena for public participation and deliberation; a reconceptualization necessitated by the historical experience of totalitarianism.[37]

This reconfiguration of mass communication and media studies by critical theory elevated the theoretical discourse across the cultural studies project by pressing scholars to confront the undemocratic character of mass culture, and, by extension, to acknowledge and overcome the possible collusion of research with the dominant political and economic system; to overcome the prevalent abstracted empiricism of "the assiduous collecting of facts [in] connection with problems."[38] This trajectory of (critical) cultural studies scholarship was further amplified by Smythe, who argued that Western Marxism had not given enough attention to the complex role of communications in capitalism.[39] As a "neoliberal" Academy privileged studies of globalization and postmodernism, Marxist academics were marginalized across the social sciences as young scholars were dissuaded from adopting explicitly Marxist approaches to social and cultural analysis. Smythe's concerns were proven fair by the clear reduction in articles

focusing on Marx between the 1980s and the 2000s: a period marked by "the intensification of neoliberalism, the commodification of everything (including public service communication in many countries), and a strong turn towards postmodernism and culturalism in the social sciences."[40]

Transforming traditionalist mass communication research into a "critical" media studies, thus, demanded the radical critiquing of positivist philosophy, neo-behavioral social theory, and society itself. In short, by the end of the 1970s differing schools of neo-Marxist scholarship vied for legitimacy and influence; scholarship which, in turn, would set the stage for the broader consideration of feminist and postcolonial cultural studies inquiry in the following decade, broadening the international scope and introspective perspectives of the project. The following section will cover the former, focusing on French feminists' turn to psychoanalytic feminism and materialist feminism at the dawn of the new decade.

Psychoanalytic and Materialist Feminist Theory

Second-wave feminist scholars' interest in power during the tail-end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s is rooted deeply in their desire of "understanding, criticizing, challenging, subverting, and ultimately overturning the multiple axes of stratification affecting women in contemporary Western societies, including (but not limited to) sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class oppression."[41] As authors throughout the era argued, it does not suffice simply to understand the multifarious, complex forms power takes; rather, it is essential to mobilize power through collective struggle, and by these means work towards progressive, emancipatory social change. However, despite the prevalence of these definite precursors, the colloquially recognized beginnings of the cultural studies project were decidedly more oriented towards issues of class, coming to engage issues of race and gender comparatively late. As late as 1978, the Centre's "Women's

Study Group" questioned the "absence from CCCS of a visible concern with feminist issues,"[42] and only in the 1980s did the British cultural studies project respond to pressures both of internal critiques and of US cultural studies to pay closer attention to race.

Before the ever-present struggle for women's equality was recognized in the literary studies of the late 1960s, the literary works of white, male authors describing experiences from a white, male point of view were considered the standard of universality. Any works deviating from this particular point of view—such as the works of female authors, and all authors of color—would not meet this criterion of "excellence," and were deemed unworthy of canonization. Even when white, female authors gained reluctant entrance into the literary canon in the early 1970s, they warranted neither the prestige nor academic consideration of their male peers. To consciously move against the patriarchal programming internalizing the dominance of men over women, many feminist theorists and literary critics problematized the use of scholarly frameworks such as psychoanalysis and Marxism as inherently patriarchal, arguing that these frameworks embody various elements of patriarchal ideology. Marx, for example, failed to account for the ways in which women have been oppressed by men despite their economic class. Nevertheless, feminist scholars would draw on elements of these critical theories in their examination of issues relevant to women's experiences, laying the methodological and theoretical groundwork for many of the lines of inquiry adopted by cultural studies scholars across the following decade.

In particular, a cohort of French feminist scholars rising to the academic fore over the course of the 1970s formed an avant-garde in their dedication to the philosophical dimension of women's issues, inspiring many of their British and American peers' and successors' scholarship trying to make sense of gender relations under the Reagan and Thatcher regimes of the 1980s. Broadly, this cohort turned to psychoanalytic feminism and materialist feminism: the former

concerned with women's psychological experiences; the latter interested in the social and economic oppression of women. Whereas these two approaches to analyzing women's experience in patriarchal culture often contrasted significantly, most authors acknowledged the ways in which women's social, economic, and psychological experiences are connected. These connections would prove fundamental to the development of the global cultural studies project over the course of the 1980s.

French materialist feminist theory examined the patriarchal traditions and institutions that control the physical, economic conditions by which societies oppress women. As De Beauvoir argued, men are conceptualized as essential subjects of patriarchal societies, whereas women are posited as contingent beings: whereas men are independent selves with free will and affective power, women have meaning only in relation to men.[43] Consequently, women are defined not solely by their difference from men, but by their perceived inadequacy in comparison to men. Women, thus, are not individual subjects; they are men's Others. Over the course of the 1970s, French feminist psychoanalytic theory sought to explicate the influences of living in a patriarchal society on women's psychological experience and creativity, focusing on the individual psyche, rather than group experiences. The oppression of women is not limited to the domains of the economic, political, and social; women's psychological repression at the level of the unconscious must not be disregarded. For many psychoanalytic feminist theorists, women must learn to liberate themselves within their personal psychologies before any materialist liberation could be achieved, as a woman cannot be meaningfully, "externally" liberated if she does not know intrinsically that she needs to be liberated. The opportunities for women's psychological liberation, thus, must be investigated at the site at which most of their psychological subjugation occurs: language. It is within language that detrimental, essentialist patriarchal notions of sexual difference have been defined and continue to exert their dominating influences. Particularly, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva—approaching these questions from differing perspectives—exemplified

the spirit of the French feminist scholarship of the era that would prove to be so influential in the decade to come.[44]

Language reveals patriarchal binary thoughts, which conceptualize the world in terms of absolute dichotomies. Each side of an opposition deemed inferior in patriarchal thought comes to represent the feminine; comes to represent the "lesser" to a male superior. As Cixous notes, "traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity," as patriarchal thinking conceptualizes women as naturally submissive to men.[45] Women cannot learn to resist patriarchal thinking by obtaining equal status and equal opportunity in current patriarchal society, as this would simply allow them to become a part of—and propagate—the patriarchal power structure. Rather, women *themselves* are to be understood as a source of power and energy. To this end, Cixous calls for a novel, feminine language to undermine the patriarchal binaries reducing and dominating women. Such an *écriture feminine* would be fluidly organized and freely associative, resisting patriarchal modes of thinking and writing most prevalent in academia—and in society at large—that require "correct" methods of organization, rationalist rules of logic, and linear reasoning.

Of course, that is not to say that all psychoanalytic feminist theorists believed in the necessity of an *écriture feminine*. Kristeva considered any theory that (biologically) essentializes women as misrepresenting their infinite diversity, which, in turn, leaves women vulnerable to patriarchal reduction.[46] The author recognized the social meaning given to sexual difference as oppressing women. Consequently, Kristeva moved away from the difference between sex and gender posited by her (Anglo)American peers, as patriarchy defines and controls the way its subjects relate to sex and gender as if they were the same thing. To this end, the author moved against any absolute definitions of the feminine, conceding only that femininity is marginalized and oppressed, just as the working class is marginalized and oppressed. Thus, rather than developing an *écriture feminine*, Kristeva maintains that women and men can move beyond patriarchal language

and thinking only by seeking access to the semiotic dimension of language. Differentiated from the symbolic dimension of language, in which words operate and meanings are attributed to them, Kristeva posits the semiotic dimension of language as consisting of such elements as intonation, rhythm, and body language, all of which work in congruence to reveal emotions and bodily drives.

Contemporaneously, Wittig conceptualized "the straight mind" as the perspective of anyone positioned inside the totalizing principles of heterosexuality and the gender dichotomy.[47] As an alternative, Wittig constructs a "lesbian perspective" as characteristic of those outside of the gender dichotomy, advocating strongly for the active, continuous move away from such a dichotomy, as only this would allow extraction from the phallogocentric symbolic order that constantly works to (re)orient subject to its dominant point of view. Building on the works of De Beauvoir to distinguish between "women as a class" and "woman as an essentialist concept," the author argues that "lesbian" serves as the sole concept beyond the categories of sex, as the designated subject—"the lesbian"—is neither economically, politically, or ideologically a woman. This position beyond the categories of sex derives directly from the "social contract" of patriarchal society; a social contract between men, in which heterosexual women are subjugated, and from which lesbians are excluded. After leaving France in 1976 following a falling out with the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* she cofounded, Wittig moved to the United States.[48] The author did not ascribe to the project of *écriture feminine*, as "femininity" cannot be a meaningful foundation, problematizing and destabilizing the very dichotomy of masculine and feminine as unproductive and untenable. Exploring the intersections of lesbianism, feminism, and literary form to international recognition, Wittig's scholarship over the course of the 1980s would prove instrumental in introducing continental feminist critical thought to a new generation of American feminist and queer scholars.

Significantly, feminist psychoanalytic theory does not present the entirety of feminist critical thought. Alternatively, in a reaction to psychoanalytic theory over

the course of the 1980s, French materialist feminist theory examined the patriarchal traditions and institutions that control the physical, economic conditions by which societies oppress women, and examined the ways in which men are conceptualized as essential subjects of patriarchal societies, whereas women are posited as contingent beings.

Building upon the work of De Beauvoir, Delphy offered a feminist critique of the patriarchy based on Marxist principles.[49] Women are the subordinates within the economic unit of the family, much in the same manner as the lower classes are oppressed by the upper classes in society. Women's prolonged, unrecognized subjugation is resultant of a lack of perceived shared history. Unlike other oppressed groups—such as oppressed economic classes and racial and religious minorities—there are few historical records of women's shared culture, shared traditions, or shared oppression. Due to these forms of subjugation, women's allegiance to men from their own social class, race, or religion always supersedes their allegiance to any women. This separation and oppression occurs predominantly through the "labor contract" of marriage, through which women's unpaid domestic labor is trivialized as "housework," and disregarded as warranting further analysis or consideration. In patriarchal societies like Reagan's American or Thatcher's Britain, Delphy argues, women's labor is domesticized and undervalued, continuously acerbating the power imbalance between men and women.[50] Consequently, women constitute a separate, oppressed class, regardless of their socioeconomic standing. Turning to Marxist theory, the author underlines that understanding anything about sexuality or gender must be preceded by an exploration of these economic realities.

Similarly, Guillaumin posited this characterization and definition as fundamentally reducing women to property, to be "exchanged" or "given away" in marriage, which functions as the primary form of women's oppression.[51] Women are not solely exploited in the labor market and the home; they are oppressed by "direct physical appropriation," which the author defines as "the reduction of women to

the state of material objects."[52] The overall effect of this appropriation is to deprive women of a sense of individuality, independence, and autonomy, as would be increasingly recognized in contemporaneous scholarship across the cultural studies project.

Feminist critics, thus, drew from theories and methodologies of a wide range of academic subdisciplines, adapting their tools and frameworks in an interdisciplinary manner and drawing connections among seemingly divergent schools of thought. The continental feminist theory culminating during the late 1970s would prove influential, inspiring British and American peers and successors across the sub-disciplinary divides of the cultural studies project well into the 1980s and beyond. Problematizing the categories, oppositions, and dichotomies on which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely, the critical/cultural scholarship of the late 1970s shared substantial parts of its intellectual lineage with their contemporaneous feminist peers; the postmodern conception of identity as an ensemble of various unstable positions at the heart of the project problematized traditional formulations of sexuality as a personalized issue.

Problematically, however, the white mainstream feminist thought of the late 1970s encouraged women of color to prioritize gender issues over racial issues, arguing that they are oppressed more by sexism than by racism. Simultaneously, men of color's patriarchal cabal encouraged women of color to prioritize racial issues over gender issues, arguing that women of color are oppressed more by racism than by sexism. In response to this erasure, subdisciplines across the critical/cultural studies tradition would seek to challenge the assumptions on which empiricist notions of subjectivity depend, conceptualizing a form of expressive pluralism where identity is reified.[53] By understanding identity as represented in a self-evident and authentic manner in one's body, collectivity came to be reduced to group affiliation defined by the standard of authentic

embodiment. These questions, significantly, would spur a renewed engagement with questions of race across the broader cultural studies project.

Post-Colonialism and the Operation of Western Hegemony

The intersections between questions of race and cultural studies are myriad, and must be traced back to the origins of the project. In its earlier stages, the British cultural studies project was decidedly attentive to forms of hierarchical oppression. By applying their "sophisticated" methods of analysis to "low," popular arts and practices, early British cultural studies scholars exemplified many of the democratizing, egalitarian, and anti-hierarchical drivers associated with critical race scholarship today, and consequently laid much of the groundwork on which future studies were built. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to trace what would come to be known as cultural studies solely to the achievements and aims of the Birmingham Centre. Rather, it is imperative to draw a more diffuse, international genealogy for cultural studies, comprised of essential works of authors such as Barthes, Lefebvre, Fiedler, and Fanon. As the end of World War II prompted a global movement of decolonization, the common academic conceptualization of the relationship of empire and society would change in step. Whereas previous generations of theorists approached this conceptualization from a Western perspective, alternative theories of empire and society were proposed by individuals whose perspectives were profoundly shaped by their experience of being a colonial subject. Recognizing the international lineage of the cultural studies project problematizes the popular Anglo-diffusionist narratives tracing the inception of cultural studies to the United Kingdom, underlining the importance of not discounting those precursors to the Centre written in "nonhegemonic" (i.e. non-English) languages.

Particularly, at the close of the 1970s scholars across the cultural studies project returned to Fanon's clairvoyant consideration of a number of currents within contemporary cultural studies, as Fanon's questioning and problematization of colonialist imagery served as a clear precursor to the later anti-orientalist and postcolonial critiques forwarded in cultural studies scholarship.[54] Anticipating the anti-essentialist critique of race, Fanon clearly conceptualized the conjunctural, constructed nature not only of racial categorizations but also of communitarian self-definition. Consequently, Fanon posited race as situated, constructed, and semiological, and anticipated the constructivist current within the cultural studies project that would come to the fore over the course of the 1970s.

Whereas previous generations of theorists approached this conceptualization from a Western perspective, over the course of the 1970s alternative theories of empire and society were proposed by scholars whose perspectives were profoundly shaped by their experience of being a colonial subject. These alternative theories developed alongside separate academic perspectives. On the one hand, the Marxist theories of imperialism were elaborated into complex models of inequitable national development, leading to a world-systems perspective. On the other hand, post-colonial intellectuals—building on the works of Fanon and Césaire—would come to emphasize the cultural and psychological aspects of colonial domination and resistance.[55] Deeply critical of liberal humanism's shrouding of the history of Western colonial dominion with a pervasive facade of human progress, "truth," and "freedom," authors would explicate the evils of dogmatism and stereotypical thinking, and would explicate a deep fissure in the operation of Western hegemony by which the West appeared both to reach its limits and to construct its dominance.[56] If the West represented itself as autonomous and universal in the domination of "the Orient," then the encounter with "the native" indicated the point of both the limit and the fabrication of such a representation.[57] One such scholar profoundly shaped by the experience of being a colonial subject, Palestinian American cultural critic

Edward Said would urge the reconsideration of scholarly analyses of non-Western cultures.[58]

Said explored the cultural and psychological aspects of colonial domination and the resistance of empire. Born in equal parts out of the political realities of the Arab-Israeli wars between 1967 and 1973, and the theoretical revolutions associated with continental post-structuralism, Said drew a genealogy of "Oriental studies" by documenting the entanglement of the Western traditions of the Enlightenment in the domination of the non-Western world. Explicating the essentializing narratives of Western scholars regarding the so-called "East"—the geographical territory spanning Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East—throughout its history, Said problematized the self-aggrandizing historization of the European Great Powers and, later, North America by combining the notion of essentialism with Foucault's assumption that there is no such thing as an objective reality; that there is no way to "detach the scholar [from] the fact of his involvement [in the world]."[59] Synthesizing Foucault's efforts to conceptualize knowledge and power as interrelated and as a potent social force, as well as Gramsci's focus on the cultural conditions sustaining domination in class-structured societies, Said exposed the extent to which Eurocentric cultural meanings were complicit, instrumental in Western imperialist efforts. The author argued that "empire" must be understood as simultaneously constituted by territorial dominion, material gain, and cultural meanings. The implicit and explicit Western conceptualizations of the East as comprised of exoticized, primitive, and irrational nations rationalize—if not *necessitate*—Western imperial intervention. Within such hegemonic structures, these essentializing forms of discourse—*Orientalism*—found expression across social, cultural, and academic conversations as a result of—and in perpetuation of—the power of the dominant group.

Moving beyond the limited claim that ideas legitimate imperialism, Said sought to establish a normative framework for analyzing those imperial practices making

empire possible by producing the desire for it. By shaping colonial desires and offering symbolic incitements and justifications for territorial expansion, narration and cultural meanings play as much a role in imperialism as does political economy. Emphasizing the role of scientific knowledge in creating "the Orient" as a cultural fantasy and projection of Western desire and power, Said posits academic knowledges as accruing material force from the concrete practices of imperial policies and administration. The impacts of this critical line of inquiry would ripple throughout the global cultural studies project, urging scholars to grapple with the colonial histories of their nations by critically exploring questions of race with an urgency heretofore unforeseen.

As the affluence of the "post-war boom" waned in the United Kingdom and the United States, later resulting in the austerity of Reaganomics and Thatcherism over the course of the 1980s, its optimistic cultural disposition made way for the "control culture" accompanying the growing repression of all spheres of political and cultural life. This crisis of capitalism saw economic and social disputes phrased as "law and order" issues; saw "crime" arise as a key theme in the maintenance of hegemony, able to symbolize the "unity of the nation" at greatly unequitable cost to different class cultures.[60]

As a mugging in Handsworth, England in 1972 elicited a massive response from the judicial system and the public, news media would come to describe the situation as "a frightening new strain of crime." These debates would soon lament a perceived deterioration of the "British way of life," as well as the collapse of law and order in the country. Within a few years, the debates crystalized around a singular, imagined culprit: Black inner-city youth. Within the conservative British public imagination, Black youth had become synonymous with mugging. The egregious news coverage of the Handsworth case would lay bare an entire terrain of contending, contentious forces—shaping the incident from outside and fortifying the hegemonic endeavors of the power of the state to increase its control of the thoughts and actions of social groups, at the clear detriment of

always, already marginalized groups. Wielding Marxist thought as a lens through which to gaze at the state and the "peculiarities of the English," "mugging" is not to be perceived as a fact consumed in the circuit of public communication, but as a relation "in terms of the social forces and contradictions accumulating within it . . . or in terms of the wider historical context in which it occurs."[61] Expanding the localized phenomenon of "mugging" to a broader social history of the United Kingdom after World War II, Hall and colleagues moved the study of ideology away from a transactional model, in favor of a structural and historical alternative.[62]

Historical issues, here, are precisely the "critical forces which produce 'mugging' in the specific form in which it appears," highlighting the critical importance of the theories and methodologies of the cultural studies project for understanding news.[63] The British were moved to condemn and cast out this "folk devil" because of the limited, unsatisfactory answers offered within the ideological constraints of their country's capitalist system.[64] Facing the crisis of a faltering post-imperial economy, the British were confronted with the lacking capacity of established parties to mobilize and guide political activity, leading to the inevitable decline of political legitimacy, hegemony, and general authority. In light of this pessimist crisis, Hall and colleagues argued for the application of a Gramscian perspective to various existing theories and paradigms in the analysis of racism and related social phenomena, as this allows for a novel understanding of the subjection of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideologies which imprison and define them; as it explicates how different, contradictory racially structured social phenomena can be woven into and integrated within different ideological discourses.

As Hall later noted, Gramsci's novel conceptualization of ideology was radical, refusing any pre-given, unified ideological subject; rather, Gramsci recognized the "plurality of selves" of which the subject of thoughts and ideas is composed.[65] Gramsci's notion of hegemony presumes certain ideas of normativity for the

masses on the left. As ideas of “civil society” come to refer to a global normative order that does not exist, a cultural studies that deals in the idiom of such normativity begins to lose track of social and cultural facts. This leads to inaccurate description, misrepresenting which social forces are acting in a given time-space.[66] As “power” comes to be conceptualized as ontological, intensive, factical, and communicational in a post-hegemonic epoch, culture—once perceived as outside of the everyday—is to be understood as existent within the everyday. The cultural studies project, therefore, comes in many ways to be indistinct from culture industry.[67] This complex, fragmentary conception of consciousness consciously moved away from the Marxist notion of “false consciousness.” The implicit attack Gramsci advances on the traditional conception of the given, unified ideological class subject, at the heart of traditional Marxist theorizing in this area, functions as an essential component of Gramsci’s broader dismantling of the state.[68]

Of course, the engagement of cultural studies scholarship with issues of race did not exist within a vacuum. Rather, the decolonization of global culture in the 1980s would lead to sustained attacks against white supremacist institutions and modes of thinking across the academy. Actively antagonizing the audacious appropriation of cultural and material production of non-Europeans that is characteristic of Eurocentrism, the more radical cultural studies scholars sought to decolonize representation—not solely in terms of cultural artifacts, but rather in terms of power relations within forms of communication and amongst communities. Such radical multiculturalism would call for a profound restructuring and reconceptualization of the power relations between cultural communities, laying the groundwork for a broader post-colonial agenda within cultural studies scholarship—a movement characterized by its relational approach to issues of multiculturalism, colonialism, and race, ushering in an essential, ongoing chapter in the history of the cultural studies project.

In an era of "imperial postmodernity," in which globalized capitalism has succeeded in producing "a fundamentally new form of rule," the machinations of industrial modernization have been supplanted by a postmodern form of capitalism so all-encompassing that "capitalism has become a world."[69] Consequently, contemporary capitalism needs to be conceptualized as a system geared towards the "production of life" beyond the mere production of goods; indeed, the system's "primary task is to administer life."[70] To this end, it was essential to develop a critical postcolonial standpoint, and extend the focus and terrain of postcolonial theory by merging the concerns of political economy to postcolonial discourse. Arguing for a new universalism—which may keep open the possibilities of other ways of being, transmit histories of resistance, and give voice to the excluded—Venn called for a "postcoloniality" which might "implicate an emancipatory imagination."[71] Later, Gilroy drew an expressive through-line from the politics of Churchill, to Powell, to the authoritarian populism of the Thatcher governments of the 1980s, recognizing the idea of the white working class as invented within the cultural politics of race as the antithesis to Black youth's criminality and lawlessness; forms of policing and criminalization practiced in the hinterlands of empire would come to be repatriated and used against those who were cast as "lesser breeds without the law."[72] Culture, here, is not to be conceived as a hermetically closed system regulated by ethnic absolutism; rather, the rhythms of life are to be understood as having their own protocols, ethical maxims, and terms of access.[73] Culture is not a closed system, as its terms are (re)negotiated in real time; as those without access to its terms (re)define them in potentially radical and transformative ways. These currents—informed by the critical cultural studies scholarship of the late 1970s and necessitated by the austere politics of 1980s Reaganomics and Thatcherism—caused ripples across the cultural studies project that can be felt to this day.

Meeting the Moment: Cultural Studies in the 1980s

Marked by the Reagan regime in the United States of America and the Thatcher era in the United Kingdom, the year 1980 marked a symbolic turning point across the Western world. Sub-disciplinary debates fundamental to the development and continued importance of the cultural studies project came to a head over the course of the late 1970s, culminating in key publications regarding the criticality of global cultural studies scholarship. As the late 1970s moved into the early 1980s, differing schools of neo-Marxist scholarship vied for legitimacy and influence—scholarship which, in turn, would set the stage for the broader consideration of feminist and post-colonial cultural studies inquiry in the following decade, broadening the international scope and introspective perspectives of the project. Notably, a cohort of French feminist scholars rising to the academic fore over the course of the 1970s formed an avant-garde in their dedication to the philosophical dimension of women's issues, inspiring many of their British and American peers' and successors' scholarship trying to make sense of gender relations under the authoritative, conservative regimes of the 1980s. These connections would prove fundamental to the development of the global cultural studies project over the course of the 1980s. Subdisciplines across the critical/cultural studies tradition would seek to challenge the assumptions on which empiricist notions of subjectivity depend, conceptualizing a form of expressive pluralism where identity is reified. Following a global movement of decolonization, the common academic conceptualization of the relationship of empire and society would change in step. Whereas previous generations of theorists approached this conceptualization from a Western perspective, alternative theories of empire and society were proposed by individuals whose perspectives were profoundly shaped by their experience of being a colonial subject. In light of these developments, Grossberg summarized the cultural studies scholarship of the late 1970s as the "radical contextualism" embodied in the concept of articulation.[74] Predominantly

concerned with highly contingent interventions, scholars across the United Kingdom and the United States called for an "interdisciplinary and antidisciplinary" form of scholarship, characterized by "modesty [rather than] imperializing discourse."[75] This served as the main challenge to the project over the course of the 1980s, more so than globalization or neoliberalism. The authors covered in this manuscript—alongside their globally dispersed peers—challenged "the assumption, crucial to euro-modern ways of thinking, that contexts can be treated as a set of fractured and relatively autonomous domains – economics, culture, and politics," proposing an alternative to euro-modernity by constructing an ontology of modernity as a multiplicity with regard to both space and time.[76] Grossberg, thus, recognized the transitory period of the 1970s into the 1980s as marked by the long debate regarding cultural studies as an ideal site for the study of power and culture in constant flux. Cultural studies scholars of the era had to tread lightly to offer diligent, rigorous academic work across the academy, whilst remaining relevant and applicable for cultural practitioners outside the academy: "We are not priests! We don't get to tell people how to live their lives!"[77] This passionate ejaculation underlines a foundational aspect of the cultural studies scholarship of the late 1970s that Grossberg exalts: the necessity to remain critical without resorting to prescription. The problematization of the categories, oppositions, and dichotomies on which conventional notions of race, sexuality, and identity rely, thus, inspired major contributions across the disciplines of the cultural studies project, whose influences continue to resonate across sub-disciplinary divides.

Notes

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38. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 190–91.

39. Dallas W. Smythe, "Communication: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977), 1–27.

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41. Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 2.

42. Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination, special issue, *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1978).

43. Simone De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

44. Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa"; Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

45. Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 92.

46. Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

47. Monique Wittig, "Paradigm," *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts*, ed. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979); Monique Wittig, "La Pensée Straight," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 7, no. 7 (1980): 45–53; Monique Wittig, "On Ne Naît Pas Femme," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 8, no. 8 (1980): 75–84, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40619199 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/40619199> .

48. Ilana Eloit, "American Lesbians Are Not French Women: Heterosexual French Feminism and the Americanisation of Lesbianism in the 1970s," *Feminist Theory* 20, no. 4 (2019): 381–404, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1464700119871852 < http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1464700119871852> .

49. De Beauvoir, *Deuxième Sexe*; Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (London: Verso, 1984).

50. As Delphy underlines, the vast majority of "developed societies" in the modern age

> depend on the unpaid labour of women for domestic services and child-rearing. These services are furnished within the framework of a particular relationship to an individual (the husband). They are excluded from the realm of exchange and consequently have no value. They are unpaid. Whatever women receive in return is independent of the work which they perform because it is not handed out in exchange for that work (i.e., as a wage to which their work entitles them), but rather as a gift. The husband's only obligation, which is obviously in his own interest, is to provide for his wife's basic needs, in other words he maintains her labour power.

Delphy, *Close to Home*, 60. ↩

51. Colette Guillaumin, "The Practice of Power and Belief in Nature," in *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism*, ed. Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins (1978, London: Taylor and Francis, 1996). ↩

52. Guillaumin, "Practice of Power and Belief," 74. ↩

53. Lorraine Bethel, "But Some of Us Are Brave," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982). As Bethel later observed, an understanding of this double oppression forms the basis of African American feminist criticism: "Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression. It incorporates a political analysis that enables us to comprehend and appreciate the incredible achievements Black women . . . made in establishing artistic and literary traditions of any sort, and to understand their qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society full of institutionalized and violent hatred for both their Black skins and their female bodies. Developing and maintaining this consciousness is a basic tenet of Black feminism" (178). ↩

54. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952). ↩

55. Fanon, *Peau Noire*; Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961); Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine: 1955). ↩

56. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987). ↩

57. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). ↩

58. Said, *Orientalism*. ↩

59. Said, *Orientalism*, 10. ↩

60. Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*.

61. Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, viii.

62. Hall et al. come to the conclusion that "the mugger" represents the perfect scapegoat of all classes, a "folk devil" reflecting "the fears and anxieties of those who first imagined, and then actually discovered him: young, black, threatening the traditional peace of the streets {and} embodying in his every action and person, feelings and values that were the opposite of those decencies and restraints which make England what she is." Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 161–62.

63. Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 185.

64. The United Kingdom would face "iron times," as "Britain in the 1970s is a country for whose crisis there are no viable capitalist solutions left, and where, as yet, there is no political base for an alternative socialist strategy. It is a nation locked in a deadly stalemate: a state of unstoppable capitalist decline." Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 309.

65. Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci,* ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers Co., 1971).

66. Alternatively, "post-hegemonic" politics disregard such normativity in favor of the factual—the factual, in the traditions of Weber and Durkheim, referring less to events or things *in* the world than to statements *about* the world. As Heidegger argued, whenever being—and, especially, *Dasein*—escapes the confines of technology into the space of existence, it enters at the same time the realm of facticity. This facticity (*Faktizität*) is in the realm not of *beings* but of *being*; Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik* (Frankfurt am Main, DE: Klostermann, 1979).

67. Nevertheless, the increasing overlap of the cultural and industrial principles—of fact and of value—is not necessarily, as Adorno and Horkheimer recognized, the industrialization of culture; it indicated, at the same time, the "culturification" of industry. The abstract homogeneity of industry deadens "the being" of culture, whereas "culturification" brings life and ontology to the mechanism of industry. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (New York: Verso, 1979).

68. Sebastiaan Gorissen, "The Marxist 'Disciplining' of the Cultural Studies Project," *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.21 < https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.21> .

69. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 386.

70. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 24.

71. Couze Venn, *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds* (London: SAGE, 2006), 118. ↩

72. Paul Gilroy, *Ain't No Black*, 13. ↩

73. Gilroy sought to explicate the long-lasting, destructive impact of the British colonial empire on both the colonized and the colonizers, exploring the ways in which the "double standards" of imperialism ingrained in the Commonwealth the understanding of the United Kingdom as the "Mother country," whilst nationalist British politicians—such as Churchill, and later Powell—would not cease their endeavors to segregate immigrants and "keep Britain white." ↩

74. Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). ↩

75. Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, 15, 18–19. ↩

76. Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, 3. ↩

77. Grossberg quoted in Graeme Turner, *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011), 160. ↩

Author Information

Sebastiaan Gorissen

Sebastiaan Gorissen is an assistant professor with Saint Michael's College's Department of Digital Media and Communications. He earned his PhD at the University of Utah and studies digital media, popular culture, and the migratory movements of deplatformed content creators and their communities.

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Article details

Sebastiaan Gorissen, "Years in Cultural Studies: 1980—Neo-Marxism, Feminism, and Post-Colonialism at the Dawn of a New Decade of Cultural Studies," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.5

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Introduction

by Joshua Falek | Aporias, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT This special section provides snapshots of the field of cultural studies, querying theoretical lapses, overlaps, and contentions between and within competing texts. In these short pieces, emerging scholars enter contemporary or historic academic debates to complicate the canon without a desire for resolution.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, scholarly communication, theory

Cultural studies has never been a stranger to controversy, disagreement, or drama. But these disputes emerge precisely because there are stakes to the minutiae, because something as seemingly trivial as whether a term is framed as a verb or a noun can make the most profound of differences in how we see and understand the world. Other times, analysis yields to sites where memory, justice, or even life itself may be on the line, and so our debates take on an even greater tenor of urgency. Yet, in the desire to publish and/or perish, or to introduce some grand intervention, rarely are there the opportunities to merely limn specific contradictions. What would happen if instead of meditating on a potential fix, we stayed with the trouble just a bit longer?

In Aporias we embrace the debate. Here, emerging scholars tarry with contemporary or historic controversies or lacunae within cultural studies or related fields that have yet to be properly synthesized. Rather than settle these conceptual dilemmas, these scholars each explore a disagreement or distinction without any intention of resolution. Wading through these divisions, these articles

provoke future thought by investigating the lapses, overlaps, and contentions between and within competing theories and texts.

In particular, this special section of *Lateral* was constructed as a vehicle for the research of junior scholars, valuing the unique insight of these writers. Due to their deep immersion in texts—whether it be from their comprehensive examinations, writing their dissertation, the terror of the academic job market, or their sheer love of scholarship—these early career researchers bring fresh perspectives that disrupt canonical thought and nuance earlier conversations.

So, enter Aporias, a section devoted to mining cultural studies, to embracing the mess, and to reorienting us toward what may be next.
For details on submissions, see the Aporias CFP < https://csalateral.org/upcoming/#aporias> .

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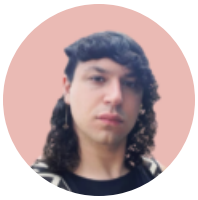

Joshua Falek

Joshua Falek is a PhD candidate at York University in Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies. They hold an MA in Women and Gender Studies from the University of Toronto. Their research thinks together trans subjectivity, anti-Blackness, and affect. They are the editor of Aporias, a special section of *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*. Their work has been published in or is forthcoming in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Rhizomes*, *New Centennial Review*, *Feminist Theory*, *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, *Cultural Studies*, and the book, *Blessings Beyond the Binary*.

View all of Joshua Falek's articles.

Article details

Joshua Falek, "Introduction – Aporias," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.21

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

The Future Isn't Now: Impossible Action in Political Scholarship

by Ryan Carroll | Aporias, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT In a world of negation, it is exhilarating to imagine possibilities. Such is evident in the strain of critique that asserts there is something radically productive in opening up possibilities. This makes sense: critical theory seeks to illuminate something beyond endless torrents of death and destruction. But, this essay contends, the thrill of possibility-creation has created a new aporia: the affect *gesture* of possibility risks overshadowing the *realization* of radical possibilities. Various strains of scholarship presume that scholarly politics is a matter of perceiving and awakening possibilities. The impulse is most readily clear in utopianist scholarship like that of José Esteban Muñoz, but it's also evident in work by Saidiya Hartman, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and even Rita Felski. All these materials propose that cultural materials can coordinate possible worlds, and by extension, scholarship competency is to schematize them. But, I argue, the scholarship that follows these thinkers risks becoming trapped by possibility. It's captivating to imagine new ways of being or living or knowing, but there exists neither the professional incentive nor the affective discipline to realize those possibilities. In our reverie at imagining the construction of a better world, our blueprints don't necessarily reach the builder—and the indulgence of possibility risks sliding back into despair. This essay does not argue for dismissing the scholarship above, but rather suggests we haven't read them *well enough*. Muñoz, Hartman, and Sedgwick are not drunk on hope; their openness to possibility comes from the mute agony of living in an unlivable world. Although a variety of material factors stand in the way of scholar-activism, this affective trap remains one of the most pressing—for if we do not recognize the feelings that structure political scholarship, we will only be playing a language game, projecting possibilities that could never come to fruition.

KEYWORDS activism, affect, hope, possibility, utopia

In a dark world, it's exhilarating to dream of possibility. A certain vein of literary and cultural critique is founded on this principle, proposing that there is something politically productive in *imagining otherwise*. Such scholarship, which

stretches across a variety of different methodological positions, is readily recognized by its gestural rhetoric—its stakes are to inaugurate new paradigms, shed light on potential ways of being, envision other worlds. In one way, this ethos makes sense: radical politics *should* point the way to something better than death and destruction. But it seems that the thrill of possibility-creation has produced a new aporia for critique. The affect that undergirds possibility politics—the ecstasy of imagining otherwise—runs the risk of obscuring the obstacles between critique and action and thereby making critique more indulgent than generative, more projective than powerful, more self-soothing than edifying.

The politics of possibility descends from a critical-theoretical turn toward speculative thinking in the past two decades. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), a seminal text in queer studies, is perhaps the most salient example of such thought: Muñoz posits on the first page that queerness is emblematic of "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[1] For him, queerness is a "warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" and studying queer aesthetics unveils "blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" for human sociality.[2] But *Cruising Utopia* is not alone in its speculative disposition. A similar maneuver appears, albeit with different disciplinary coordinates, in Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," which positions Hartman's method of critical fabulation as a means for "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)" to tell provisional histories of transatlantic slavery.[3] Though slavery's archive is inevitably fragmented, possibility lingers in the act of critical intervention: aporia births vitality, if only temporarily. Hartman's later *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) offers a less qualified version of this historical-poetical method: excavating "the nothing special and the extraordinary brutality" of fin-de-siècle Black life, she says, produces a "chorus" which "propels transformation . . . is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of otherwise."[4] While Hartman does not avow precisely the same utopianist

commitment as Muñoz, *possibility* is still a galvanic force of her work; critique's work seems to be its possibility-making.

Nor are appeals to possibility confined to what we loosely (and/or arbitrarily) call critique. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading," for instance, posits the titular reparative method not as an aesthetic practice for the well-lettered but as a way to "assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have the resources to offer an inchoate self."[5] What we "learn" from such objects, she argues, is the "many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture."[6] Tucked into Sedgwick's language is an appeal to criticism's possibility-making faculty: her reparative politics is about discerning what makes it possible for an individual or collective to survive in a hostile world. Even Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, the most stridently anti-critique entry in literary studies' so-called Method Wars, nestles an appeal to possibility within its political pragmatism. Though Felski dismisses critique's supposed utopianism, she asserts that her aim is to find a method, and thus a politics, open to "the differences, variations, contradictions, and possibilities in social conditions as we find them."[7] The problem, for Felski, is about how literary methodology conditions our ability to judge which resources for possible worlds are contained in which political environments—not so different from Muñoz or Hartman, in an odd sense.

I make this critical tour to highlight that possibility politics is not a narrow strain of thought. On the contrary, as Caroline Levine argues, critical attention to potentiality stretches across theoretical schools and methodologies (Levine herself cites Derek Attridge, Jonathan Kramnick, and Roderick Ferguson as noteworthy examples,[8] though we might also think of Ernst Bloch,[9] Theodor Adorno,[10] Herbert Marcuse,[11] or, for that matter, the lengthy Hegelian philosophical tradition from which they emerged—all of which is incredibly productive to consider but which there isn't space here to discuss).[12] This sort of scholarship asserts that cultural materials, whether in themselves or upon being

activated by scholarly engagement, contain some way of coordinating possibilities and envisioning new worlds. By extension, critical theory's competency is to make these possibilities explicit. In the ecosystem of revolutionary vocations, the scholar is imagined as a medley of prophet and strategist, herald of the possible and presager of action.

But the critique that's followed Sedgwick, Hartman, and Muñoz, I think, has become yoked to an affect that risks *entrapment* in the promise of possibility. Although it's easy to indulge in rapturous accounts of scholarship's worldmaking power, it's also easy to forget that there's no necessary connection between a hopeful affect and an ability to *enact* possibilities. As Patricia Stuelke has remarked, "To imagine that things are broken and can be fixed with the best of intentions, with a labor of love, with a new way of reading . . . is a category error that neither the planet nor any of its inhabitants can afford."[13] Although we can revel in imagining the construction of a better world, there's no guarantee our blueprints reach the builder—and, even worse, the binge of hope can lead back into despair.

To be clear, I am not taking issue with the speculative scholars I've considered so far—their work is illuminating, and in fact, it's precisely my belief that we haven't read them *well enough*. Instead, our readings have led to a kind of ersatz utopianism that can occlude the real demands of activist commitment. Although a variety of material factors stand in the way of scholar-activism, from institutional complicity to prohibitive constraints on time,[14] the affect of possibility scholarship risks painting over these difficulties. The stakes are high: if we do not recognize the feelings that structure our scholarly political commitments, scholarly activism will be nothing more than a language game.

*

It begins when I (you, we) inhabit the world. The world feels terrible. For reasons related to content oversaturation, to my own uncertainty in what I do, to my own struggle to commit to doing the work of making the world better, and to the multiple cultural phenomena grouped under the rubric of "crisis," things feel bad.

Then, I open a book. A special book. I read a pithy, punchy, compelling voice: English departments and/or the humanities and/or higher education and/or liberal democracy and/or global ecology is/are in a state of crisis, the kind of crisis that seems as crushing to read about as it is to experience (a vulgar abstraction, but a common one for many in the academy). Then, somewhere in the book, perhaps in its introduction or methodological outline, maybe in the theoretical intervention or maybe in the rhetorical flourish that hints at its final chapter, there's something else. Literary studies itself, I learn, represents hope. I realize, carried along by the beaming light of incandescent language, that reading can sculpt the flames of possibility. Suddenly, it seems thrillingly simple to touch another world. I learn that I can build with literature, that the past contains tools to reconstruct the future, that I belong to a class of heroes prophesying visions to construct a new world. I just need do what I'm already good at doing: write about books.

I tell my colleagues about the text, mention it in conference panels, drop references in essays, content myself with knowing that I am on the frontlines of something new. Possibilities seize me: perhaps I will use Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) for mutual aid communications or Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) to organize a community collective or Morowa Yejidé's *Creatures of Passage* (2021) for creating collective historical records.

But I don't.

I might fire off an email or donate money to a bail fund or germinate an idea for a discussion group, but eventually, the ecstasy fades into the murmur of everyday life. I return to research and teaching, and the grand possibilities I excavated from my literature of choice fade away. I tell myself it's okay (*the real work I do is the care work of teaching, anyway*). I open my phone. I'm slapped in the face with content overload, crisis porn. Things feel bad. It begins again.

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In part, this is a story about one person (me) with their own foibles (mine). Simultaneously, however, this is also not about just one person. This is about the kinds of feelings that thread across our intellectual engagement, the affects that shape how we read and speak and think about acting. My intent here is not to engage in what David Kurnick has thoughtfully called a "moralized characterology," a rhetorical maneuver implying that the crisis in the humanities has something to do with particular kinds of psyches.[15] To be clear: whether or not the humanities wither under institutional austerity will have little to do with the affect of our possibility politics. Yet though our psyches won't determine critique's institutional fate, *whether* and *how* we're able to put our gestures into action has entirely to do with our affective disposition, with our ability to convert everyday feelings into political commitments.

And so this is not just a story about me. I suspect that you, too, have read a work that's made you hope, that's given you the thrill of possibility, and that has dropped you back into hopelessness. I suspect that you've read a paper or heard a conference presentation that contends with unspeakable violence—white supremacy, homophobia, imperialism—and, blithely invoking possibility

scholarship (often that of Muñoz or Hartman), paves over the difference between gesture and action.

This mode of scholarship, I contend, risks producing the kind of the affect that Lauren Berlant terms cruel optimism: "When something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[16] For Berlant, this kind of relation is constituted by "attachments that organize the present," rather than ones that responsibly relate to the future.[17] The connection might seem odd, given that possibility politics professes to be about futurity—but despite its notional commitment to the future, the affect of possibility politics is inevitably bound up with how one feels *now*. Inevitably, any critical maneuver will draw from and produce specific affects in those who make and read them; in the case of possibility politics, it isn't just about the future we imagine but our disposition to the present, the way that dreams of possible worlds can soothe the psychic pain of contemporary political violence. But—and this part is crucial—despite its power to energize the writer and reader, to soothe the psychic pain of living in an ailing world, scholarly possibilities have no necessary relation to future-oriented action. Gestures toward possibility do not, for instance, fix the fact that, as sociologist Francesca Cancian has highlighted, to be a professional academic and committed activist are each so demanding as to preclude one another.[18]

Now, we might tell ourselves, it's hardly fair to think of theory in the same way we think about concrete action like community agriculture, wealth redistribution, or eviction disruption. Theory, we know so well and are so happy to explain, belongs in a dialectic with action; theory's purpose is to offer provocations rather than engage in concrete solution-making, and it demands non-instrumentalized thinking to do so.[19] But we shouldn't forget that dialectic demands *moving between* theory and action, not simply flinging possibilities into a void and hoping something will happen. As Nicholas Whittaker has incisively argued of "undercommons" scholarship: "it might seem as though all the undercommons has to offer us are declarations: screeds and manifestos and reading groups and

open-access journals. If David's stone cannot fell Goliath, what good are his words?"[20] Ultimately, if critique only produces hypothetical possibility and inebriated hope, then it isn't praxis—it's escapism.

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Earlier in this essay, I quoted the first page of *Cruising Utopia*, in which Muñoz asserts that queerness represents "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." But, like many who bandy about Muñoz's words, I did not quote the book's very first line: "Queerness is not yet here."[21]

The line is startling. Compared to the gossamer language of possibility-making, it seems cold and blunt. He continues: "The here and now is a prison house . . . Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that the world is not enough, that indeed something is missing."[22] There's a sober recognition that the root of utopian possibility is existential negation. Agony underpins the moment of queer worldmaking; the glimmering light of another world is only visible amidst a morass of death. Though utopianism helps one survive, it's not an opiate—it's a response to the absurd pain of living in a world that doesn't want you. In part, this complexity can be traced to *Cruising Utopia*'s historicity. As Muñoz himself clarifies, his argument is an intervention on queer theory's 90s-to-2000s tug-of-war between antisociality and neoliberal concessionism, between Lee Edelman's "fuck the social order . . . fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*," et al.[23] and *we're just like you*.[24] His affective posture belongs to a complex discursive field that is defined as much by the political prospects of 2009 as by *Cruising Utopia*'s internal logic; there's a way, in other words, that Muñoz's thought meant something different then than it does now.

The same is true of Hartman: despite the lackadaisical ease with which many scholars invoke her, her critical possibility-making emerges not in glib rhetorical flourish but in a specific historical-critical venture. In her careful sketch of critical fabulation in "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman recognizes that to do so is to "tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling"[25]—and indeed, she does so *specifically* as a counterpoint to her own critical fabulation in *Lose Your Mother* (2007).[26] Possibility folds back into impossibility; hope for the possible is born only out of the impossible, irredeemable, absolute unlivability of slavery and its afterlives. Such is evident in her first book, *Scenes of Subjection*, which concerns itself with action and possibility—not offering a roadmap for the reader, but attempting to account for slave subjects themselves. Although the book devotes considerable attention to action itself, Hartman emphasizes that the "utopian expressions of freedom" to be found in the archive of American slavery "are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere."[27] Certainly, "these small acts of resistance" can "offer some small measure of encouragement" amidst the present's "seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the quixotic search for a subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of one."[28] But this is a consolation, not a pathway to action per se.

Indeed, Hartman is wary even of consolation, as an affect of scholarly rhetoric. At the heart of "Venus in Two Acts" is Hartman's confession that, enthralling as it is to imagine "the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility" amidst the abject terror of the Middle Passage,[29] doing so would have been grossly inappropriate: "I wanted to console myself and to escape the slave hold with a vision of something other than the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic."[30] The possibility-awakening maneuvers of *Lose Your Mother* and later *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* emerge, then, not as a single monological thesis about hope, but as tenuous approaches to a problem ricocheting through her work, which she articulates in the seminal "The Position of the Unthought:" "narrat[ing] a certain impossibility, to illuminate those practices that speak to the limits of most available narratives to explain the position of the enslaved."[31] Not salvation,

at least not immediately, but *explanation*. And so from the vantage of 2007–8, critical fabulation emerged as one imperfect experiment in a long endeavor to narrate slavery's afterlife—bold, certainly, but certainly not vouchsafed in its attempt to "pr[y] open the dead book."[32]

In 2024, speaking to a broad cohort of scholars who are at least notionally committed to constructive politics,[33] it's easy to read Muñoz or Hartman and to use rhetoric like theirs and feel encouraged by our own audacity to fundamentally rethink the structure of reality. But the context that made their work bold and explosive has changed; when their positions are firmly mainstream, declaring the power of possibility isn't so bold as it seems.

In Muñoz's and Hartman's work, there is a clear admission of theodicy. Neither queer utopianism nor critical fabulation are masturbatory bacchanals of possibility; they are the often whimsical and sometimes funny but always *serious* work of navigating in a world where Death rules. Such sobriety is often lost in the possibility politics that follows from and casually invokes them. It is not that such scholarship is happy-go-lucky; on the contrary, it often inhabits the grim realities of ecocide, white supremacy, and imperial violence. But the difference that makes a difference is the engagement with disciplined action, or a lack thereof. This sort of scholarship entwines scholarship with acts of resistance—*things might seem horrible, but the act of care/imagining-otherwise/resistance that is writing itself will save us!*—but doing so, to me, seems conveniently nonspecific when it comes to political action. It runs the risk of making suffering an affective backdrop, easily redeemed by the promise we can build a different world merely by doing what we're already doing. The reader can be engulfed in vaporous hope, a sense that they *can* make the world better, that in fact the world *will* get better, just by *reading this book*. Possibility politics doesn't necessarily push readers toward action so much as help them to get out of bed each morning.

It's hard to sneer at this. Who among us (and by *us* I mean the quite narrow category of person holding or with a path to holding an advanced degree) doesn't need to be helped out of bed? But simultaneously, that's just what it takes to be an ethical actor in a difficult world, not an end in itself. This is why the danger of possibility is precisely its empowering claim, its ability to let us feel that we're doing the work when the most we're doing (in that moment, anyway) is reading or writing. I don't mean this as indulgent self-flagellation or crocodile tears about ivory tower intellectualism. It's merely a statement of fact: *more gestures to possibility do not necessarily lead to more action*.

If we wish to engage in an authentically constructive politics, doing so will require discipline.[34] We must not just imagine otherwise but *do* otherwise—discern how to enact the possibilities toward which we gesture, or, on the other hand, attend to their impossibility amidst this suffering world. This is why, as Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò has argued, constructivist politics is not just invigorating but "demanding":

> It asks us to be planners and designers, to be accountable and responsive to people who aren't yet in the room. In addition to being architects, it asks us to become builders and construction workers: to actually build the kinds of rooms we could sit in together, rather than idly speculate about which rooms would be nice. But . . . the constructive approach has implicit moral and emotional demands, as well: we can neither plan nor build a better world without collectively cultivating diverse kinds of moral and emotional discipline.[35]

We must dream, and envision, and imagine, and bring our emotional powers to bear on presaging a new world. And then we must *actually do it*. We must cultivate affective attachments that do not indulge in empty dreams of possibility or use theory as an alibi for complacency. This does not mean we should atomize all political activity—to be sure, we must develop social habits that emphasize genuine political commitments over social capital, create professional structures that help make it easy to translate our work to activism, and so much more. But none of those collective efforts can succeed without individual discipline. This

might strike the reader as monastic or militaristic, but discipline is not the sole domain of monks or soldiers. Discipline is the precondition for a radical ethic; discipline entails recognizing that it's *hard* to do the right thing in an unjust world—that forgoing easy consolation in favor of concrete action *must* be at least a little taxing. Discipline means self-knowledge and self-control. It requires us to recognize the difference between gesture and reality, to avoid the trap of self-indulgence, and, above all, to do what we say we're going to do.

If we insist on making scholarship a venue for activism, then we must do so with the genuine rigor of any other activist venture. This means knowing the difference between the drunkenness of hope and the discipline of action. It means not just cheering ourselves up or helping ourselves believe that our local action would mean something if only we got around to it. No: it means being honest in committing to action—and sometimes, it means being honest about when action is impossible.

Notes

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1. ↩
2. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1. ↩
3. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 13. ↩
4. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 167. ↩
5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 150–151. ↩
6. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 151. ↩
7. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 145. ↩
8. Caroline Levine, "In Praise of Happy Endings: Precarity, Sustainability, and the Novel," *Novel* 55, no. 3 (November 1, 2022): 389. ↩

9. See Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Fred Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

10. For a productive analysis of possibility's appearance in Adorno's writing, see Iain Macdonald, *What Would Be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

11. See Herbert Marcuse, "Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture," *Daedalus* 94, no. 1 (1965): 190–207.

12. For a useful exploration of Hegel's theory of possibility, see Nahum Brown, *Hegel on Possibility: Dialectics, Contradiction, and Modality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

13. Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 218. While I'm of a mixed mind on Stuelke's historical claims, and while I believe she fails to distinguish particularly sophisticated accounts of reparativity like Muñoz's, I believe she's entirely correct to distinguish the insidious feel-good character of the reparative affect—that "sometimes what feels like a relief, like hope, like change, like utopian possibility, actually signals a shifting orientation to existing violent infrastructures" (217).

14. See David Croteau, "Which Side Are You On?" in *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics, and Social Movement Scholarship*, ed. David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

15. David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 369.

16. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

17. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 14.

18. Francesca M. Cancian, "Conflicts between Activist Research and Academic Success: Participatory Research and Alternative Strategies," *American Sociologist* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 1993): 103.

19. See Caroline Levine, "The Long Lure of Anti-Instrumentality: Politics, Aesthetics, and Sustainability," *Modern Fiction Studies* 67, no. 2 (2021): 225–46.

20. Nicholas Whittaker, "Review: Elite Capture," *The Point*, October 18, 2022, https://thepointmag.com/politics/elite-capture/ < https://thepointmag.com/politics/elite-capture/> .

21. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1.

22. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1.

23. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 29.

24. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 18.

25. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11. ↩

26. See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 136–54. ↩

27. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13. ↩

28. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 14. ↩

29. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 8. ↩

30. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,”9. ↩

31. Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 184. ↩

32. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” 12. ↩

33. Whether this is genuine or because they have learned the argot of radical action and “structural change” as a matter of performance, is another question. ↩

34. It’s an open question, of course, whether possibility and action should be rightly imagined as co-determinants for constructive politics to begin with. Although there’s a strong critical heritage predicated on activating latent possibilities within the present, certain thinkers question the very notion that political action emerges from possibility per se. Jared Sexton, for example, has questioned the notions “that imagination requires possibility in order to flourish (does it not flourish precisely in the face of impossibility?) and that agency suffers from inescapable constraint (is constraint not rather a precondition of agency?)” (“Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” 57n1). Elsewhere, Sexton draws attention to the critical value of perceiving “activity” as distributed throughout both action and non-action: “even passivity (whether waiting or resting or languishing) is a type of activity, that of our active being, that which brings forth life from the non-life with which it is commingled. Our being is active, but that doesn’t mean our being is always in-action” (“On Black Negativity, Or The Affirmation Of Nothing”). ↩

35. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 118. ↩

Author Information

Ryan Carroll

Ryan Carroll is a PhD student in English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He researches literary theory, information theory and narrative in nineteenth-century British, American, and Caribbean literature; his dissertation studies how information plays a formally constitutive role in works of sensation fiction, American Romanticism, slave narratives, investigative journalism, and more.

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Article details

Ryan Carroll, "The Future Isn't Now: Impossible Action in Political Scholarship," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.7

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Anti-Blackness as Disavowal and Condition: Rethinking Foucault's "Carceral Society"

by Melayna Lamb and Tia Trafford | Aporias, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Recent calls to "defund the police" have seen a plethora of movements decry state funds allocated to the police and ask that those funds be placed elsewhere. In this article, we return to Michel Foucault to analyze how calls for rebalancing budgets away from the police force and towards social projects both rely on political categories established in Foucault's work and encapsulates an aporia that emerges through them. Locating shifts towards the carceral in the context of European modernity, Foucault suggests that policing moves away from the spectacular torture and punishment of sovereign and state and towards technologies of power that proliferate across the social body. Here, we suggest that in this movement between sovereignty and power emerges a central tension that Foucault is incapable of resolving—between an exteriorized sovereignty (death) that necessarily appears at the extreme limits of power (life)—which threatens to destabilize the domain of power altogether. Race—as it appears in the European frame and reaching a zenith in Nazi Germany—encapsulates Foucault's attempted mitigation. If anything, this exacerbates the problem by rendering the terms of inclusion in the domain of power (of making life live) incoherent. To see why, we go on to show how freedom from racial slavery—as space of incapacity—is the conduit through which entry is possible into the differentiated power that supposedly limits the social. But as such, the slave precisely indexes the aporia for Foucault that cannot be sutured. The implications of this can be seen in the calls to defund the police insofar as it implicitly repeats Foucault's shift from police to social power.

KEYWORDS Michel Foucault, anti-Blackness, defund, freedom, policing, power, slavery

"Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free"
– Michel Foucault, *The Subject and Power*

"A more appropriate word than hegemony is murder"
– Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*

1. Introduction

Recent calls to "defund the police" have seen a plethora of movements decry state funds allocated to the police and ask that those funds be placed elsewhere. As the homepage to one defund organization defines it:

#DefundPolice means divesting from institutions that kill, harm, cage and control our communities, and investing in violence prevention and interruption, housing, health care, income support, employment, and other community-based safety strategies that will produce safer communities for everyone.[1]

In this article, we return to Foucault to analyze how calls for rebalancing budgets away from the police force and towards social projects both rely on political categories established in the work of Michel Foucault and encapsulates an aporia that emerges through them.

Locating shifts towards the carceral in the context of European modernity, Foucault suggests that policing moves away from the spectacular torture and punishment of sovereign and state and towards technologies of power that proliferate across the social body. Conformity of behavior in liberal and neoliberal society is produced not through unmediated violence or domination, but through the distribution and channelling of action as "code of normalisation."[2] As such, Foucauldian power is perhaps better understood as the emergent result of a complex interplay of behaviors and practices across the entire social field: "'Power,' insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is

simply the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities."[3] Foucault's discussion of the shift from sovereign power to biopower sees a naked, sovereign violence acting immediately on its subjects, superseded by different techniques of power that proliferate across the social field. Strategies of normalization, and powers aimed at "making life live" in particular ways take centre stage in a bid to dethrone analyses of power that train their gaze primarily on the power of the sovereign state.[4]

As such, Foucault's work represents a shift in focus to consider the proliferation of policing across the social field with power operating not primarily through the direct actions of a sovereign state, but through normalization and circulatory forms of power that embed and maintain normative order. Here, we suggest that in this movement between sovereignty and power emerges a central tension that Foucault is incapable of resolving—between an exteriorized sovereignty (death) that necessarily appears at the extreme limits of power (life)—which threatens to destabilize the domain of power altogether. Race—as it appears in the European frame and reaching a zenith in Nazi Germany—encapsulates Foucault's attempted mitigation. If anything, this exacerbates the problem by rendering the terms of inclusion in the domain of power (of making life live) incoherent. To see why, we go on to show how freedom from racial slavery—as space of incapacity—is the conduit through which entry is possible into the differentiated power that supposedly limits the social. But as such, the slave precisely indexes the aporia for Foucault that cannot be sutured. The implications of this can be seen in the calls to defund the police insofar as it implicitly repeats Foucault's shift from police to social power.

2. From Sovereignty to Power

In *Society Must be Defended* Foucault tracks a shift from the sovereign "right to kill" to the seemingly predominant mode of power that is "to make live and let

die."[5] Across Foucault's oeuvre there are unresolved tensions on this point. There are different places where he seems to suggest that the sovereign power of the right to kill becomes displaced or marginalized by other modern techniques of power, and others where he seems to suggest they are articulated together. As Golder and Fitzpatrick discuss in *Foucault's Law*, there is evidence that both supports and complicates the idea that Foucault sees law as eclipsed or expelled from modernity, as biopolitics and disciplinary power are extended. In their words, "on the one hand he would seem to counterpose the old forms of sovereignty and law to the new modalities of power (indicating that the latter are outstripping the former); on the other he would seemingly gesture towards their interaction or mutual interaction."[6] Nevertheless we do find in Foucault that the new form of power he is concerned to track has "very specific procedures, completely new instruments, and very different equipment" and therefore is "absolutely incompatible with relations of sovereignty."[7]

Emphasizing the paradoxical and aporetic ways Foucault formulates the relationship between sovereignty and biopolitics and insisting that their association cannot or should not be read in a "monolinear form," Roberto Esposito formulates the relationship between life and biopolitics in the following way:

Biopolitics does not limit or coerce [violenta] life, but expands it in a manner proportional to its development. More than two parallel flows, we ought to speak of a singular expansive process in which power and life constitute two opposing and complementary faces. To strengthen itself, power is forced at the same time into strengthening the object on which it discharges itself; not only, but as we saw, it is also forced to render it subject to its own subjugation. Moreover, if it wants to stimulate the action of subjects, power must not only presuppose but also produce the conditions of freedom of the subjects to whom it addresses itself.[8]

Below, we suggest that the production of these conditions of freedom of the subjects to whom power is addressing itself is precisely that which Foucault refuses to engage—a necessary but unthought obverse side of the mechanics of power with which he is concerned. Sovereignty here becomes of concern to the extent that it appears at the outer or extreme limits of Foucault's field of vision. If the new, modern mechanisms of power have the function of "binding" then sovereignty, by contrast, "does not bind; it enslaves."[9]

Relatedly, death appears in the production of life as an outside force not so much immanent and internal to biopolitics but as a separate, alien and ultimately anachronistic form that demands different conceptual, analytical, and theoretical tools. As one commentary has it, "why does biopolitics continually threaten to be reversed into thanatopolitics?"—especially since death is, for Foucault, "projected inside the circle of life."[10] Not dissimilar to arguments that foreground a "colonial boomerang" to explain the state dealing out death to its own citizens, death here is something that appears from the "outside" of biopolitics.[11] What is a constitutive relation between life and death here becomes a paradox or aporia—death becomes something that needs explaining in European space, while disciplinary power—and the power to "make life live," the power that binds and normalizes—is the power that is assumed to be predominant. Recalling the exteriorization of sovereignty from power, in no uncertain terms Foucault tells us that

death is outside the power relationship. Death is beyond the reach of power and power has a grip on it only in general, overall or statistical terms.[12]

What results is that the existence of totalitarianism appears, then, as a paradox or riddle to be "solved" via recourse to external concepts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is here then that "state racism" can enter the frame:

in the biopower system, in other words, killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the

elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race. There is a direct connection between the two. In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable.[13]

So, death is made external to power: as Foucault tells us, "power is only exercised over those who are free."[14] Death enters the field of biopolitics in the form of racism, and insofar as it can be put to work to protect or improve "life in general."[15] That biopower is autonomous from sovereign power and works independently from what Foucault calls racism, then, is made clear when he states that "if the power of normalization wished to exercise the old right to kill, it must *become* racist."[16] This presumes, then, that the power of normalization is not always already racist, and similarly that the function of "racism" can be disentangled from biopower to the extent that they appear as autonomous and heterogeneous powers that at certain moments draw together reaching a zenith and maximum extension in the Nazi state.

Perhaps we might posit that Foucault's historicism projects the break that gives way to networked, rather than sovereign, power onto this break between colonial sovereignty and European power. But, as Alexander Weheliye suggests, Foucault's modernity is one that has always been resolutely European, with race and racism becoming pertinent only latterly and insofar as they are "manifested within Europe itself."[17] Foucault, Weheliye suggests, "accepts the difference between 'ethnic and biopolitical racism,' thereby naturalizing racial difference by placing 'other' races outside Europe."[18] Importantly, then, Foucault's account of power sees race and racism relevant only as it is "activated" by biopower within the European space in the nineteenth century, as something distinct from an earlier "external" racism. The new racism is biopolitical for Foucault in the sense that it uses Darwinian eugenics and discourses of purity to justify the supremacy of one race and how the "death of others makes one biologically stronger." [19]

As such, it is unsurprising that there have been attempts to rectify Foucault's biopolitics in the faces of such charges that it is ultimately a Eurocentric account unable to adequately explain the horrors of colonialism. For example, Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* ties biopower to the concepts of the state of exception, state of siege, and the enemy to identify mechanisms of violence that create "death-worlds" with entire populations being constructed as "living dead."[20] Not content with Foucault's account of the merging of biopolitics and sovereign power under the Nazi regime, Mbembe looks to the colonies and plantation for precursors to modern regimes that subjugate and kill.

In this regard, slavery for Mbembe is described as "one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation" and here death is configured (contra Foucault and with Gilroy) as representing agency, since "death is precisely that from and over which I have power" in the sense that death via suicide under the conditions of plantation blurs the relationship between "resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom."[21] This seeks to resolve Foucault's aporetic articulation of the relationships between slavery, freedom, and power by expanding the conceptual domain of the biopolitical. But this resolution falters in the supposed inclusion of slavery within the biopolitical, wherein death itself must be coded as resistance, so threatening to destabilize the conceptual armature—of making life live—altogether.

3. Slavery; Necessary and Unthought

Let us now speculatively track this exacerbation of Foucault's aporia by returning to his refusal to address the condition of freedom of the subjects to whom power is addressing itself. Foucault's analysis of power has been criticized for failing to provide an account of freedom because we cannot be emancipated *from* power, rather freedom is understood as a kind of agonistic interplay within power.[22]

Freedom is, therefore, everywhere bounded and constrained by the complex conditions that power produces and across which power operates.[23]

However, if power circulates in such a way that we are its conduits—rather than an "inert or consenting target,"[24]—then we ought also to question the nature of freedom within these complex networks of indirect action. This indicates a kind of hydraulics of power and freedom in Foucault's social field, wherein neither can be thought without the other because freedom is a condition of the exercise of power (and vice versa). So, what is perhaps missed by these criticisms is that Foucault's analysis of power might just as easily be understood as offering an analysis of freedom, insofar as entire social worlds exist as subjugating fields that are reliant upon our freedom to acquiesce to them. This, as Andrew Johnson puts it, is to foreground the question of how and why "society colludes, effectively policing itself."[25] Why, if power can only be exercised over free subjects, do we freely allow ourselves to be judged according to norms, to have our actions channelled toward certain behaviors?[26]

This problem, of "why people freely bind themselves to power,"[27] looks analogous to the thorny problem of voluntary slavery that so vexed modern philosophical and theological articulations of freedom. In suggesting that "the relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated," Foucault argues that the "problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?)."[28] This seemingly easy dismissal of the problem belies the indeterminacy of being always already thrown into an agonistic interaction between "the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom."[29] This is to say, our capacity for freedom is always already a renunciation of freedom insofar as we freely bind ourselves to power. But in so binding ourselves we are never truly enslaved since power is itself productive of freedoms since power never fully determines. In part due to this, voluntary servitude animates Foucault's account even in its dismissal, since power effectively forms the complex web through which freedoms are articulated.

For example, in the context of "mechanisms of power" that subjugate individuals, Foucault states that critique is the "art of voluntary inservitude."[30] In the context of a heterodox account of the Kantian Enlightenment, Foucault argues that the order of things is constituted by man, rather than God or a sovereign state; second, and relatedly, that there is a limit to knowledge that is imposed by us. Taken together, Foucault demonstrates that humanity comes into being through this analytic of finitude. With man taking the place of God, Foucault follows Kant's position against the rationalist tradition that articulates a relationship between man and the laws of the world, knowledge of which is limited by our position within "the great table of beings," since those limits are also understood to be "decreed or imposed by man."[31] However, as far as Foucault is concerned, whilst Kant's project of finitude is the condition of possibility for man taking the place of God, that project requires completion such that all forms of sovereignty are abandoned, including the epistemic and normative sovereignty at work in Kant's claims to universal validity. In *Society Must Be Defended*, he further describes the move towards normalization against "a juridical rule derived from sovereignty but a discourse about a natural rule, or in other words a norm."[32] Law as the expression of sovereign power is thus submerged and internalized within modernity's "code of normalization."[33]

It is in this context that critique becomes the art of voluntary inservitude precisely because the possibility of challenging mechanisms of power cannot call upon an external sovereign. Kant has already shown us that critique must be self-justifying. Here, Foucault tells us that we cannot appeal to that which lies outside of us because we are immersed in networks of power that provide the conditions of our subjectivation and in turn the conditions of critique—so in effect, there must be nothing outside to which we can appeal. The question of freedom that is exercised through its renunciation is found in the suturing of the domain of power:

[The] carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside . . . . In this panoptic society of which incarceration is the

omnipresent armature, the delinquent is not outside the law; he is, from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of the law.[34]

The subject is embedded within this interplay of critique and subjugation. But as such, the racial slave "marks-off" the domain of the social even where the slave cannot be exteriorized either spatially or temporally. For example, in *The Subject and Power*, Foucault states that

Where the determining factors are exhaustive, there is no relationship of power: slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains, only when he has some possible mobility, even a chance of escape.[35]

Foucault expands on this point in an interview "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom":

power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. Even . . . when it can truly be claimed that one side has "total power" over the other, a power can be exercised over the other only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out the window, or of killing the other person . . . if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all.[36]

Here slavery is articulated as the nexus of total incapacity and a totalized power that necessarily exists outside of the domain of power itself.[37] Slavery is here moved outside both death and even suicide (which is to say that the slave's suicide cannot recuperate the biopolitical). This articulation of slavery as total incapacity appears close, then, to Saidiya Hartman's articulation of slavery in terms of the "fungibility of the commodity [that] makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel."[38] It is in defining slavery as complete domination that

must have been surpassed for entry into the domain of power that both servitude and inservitude cannot collapse into slavery. Since "slavery is not a power relationship," for Foucault, we are subjugated insofar as we are not slaves.[39] Servitude cannot also be slavery since our insertion into civil society—even where we are subjugated—requires us to always possibly operate against mechanisms of power in its critique. So, racial slavery is the conduit through which Foucault's carceral world becomes possible through its necessary voiding. In order to be a subject, one cannot be or have possibly been, a slave.

Thus racial slavery becomes the unthinkable conceptual armature that Foucault depends upon for the coherence of freedom across the board, marking out both the domain of freedom and subjectivity through the slave's fungibility. Civil society —even where this is articulated through complex networks of policing and normalization—relies on the spectral presence of racial slavery as impossibility for the subject of power. In the process of emptying-out the world of slavery, Foucault therefore not only buries the mass of Atlantic systems of contracts, trade, and people, but *draws upon that buried slavery* to enact the limits of the possible domain of the human world. It is the *marked evasion* of racial slavery that comes to be constitutive insofar as racial slaves necessarily exceed the world they are called upon to demarcate.

The incapacity "that the slave is made to inhabit" cannot appear in the differentially ordered space of power even as it provides its supposed coherence.[40] The disavowal of absolute incapacity is the condition of the differentiated power supposed to determine the limits of the social and the necessary potential for our critique within it. But as such, racial slavery therefore indexes an aporia for civil society that cannot be sutured even where the social field is understood in terms of all-encompassing carcerality.

4. Defunding as Expansion of the Social

The implications of this can be seen in the calls to defund the police insofar as it implicitly repeats Foucault's shift from police to social power. "Defund" thus operates in compliance with the expansion of a social realm that could only possibly foreclose racial slavery, operating at best as a survival program that conciliates with society's disavowed violences. The slave is necessarily removed from the domain of power, since entry into the domain of power requires that we are not and could never have been slaves. This shifts Foucault's attempted exteriorization of death (even as it returns through racism) into the register of an aporia that cannot be resolved. Insofar as defunding recapitulates the attempted shift away from the sovereign (death at the hands of the police) and towards the social (power exercised in the name of making live), we find that power is everywhere inescapable and so *all society* becomes charged with making power-relations as non-despotic as possible. But, not only is this drive pitifully low in its ambitions, it is granted coherence only by the continued presence—and impossibility—of the slave who cannot be thought. The sovereign is not excisable in submergence under social power, whose violence, as Frank Wilderson and Patrice Douglass describe, is "peculiar, in that, whereas some groups of people might be the recipients of violence, after they have been constituted as people, violence is a structural necessity to the constitution of [Blackness]."[41] Foucault claims that "having recourse to sovereignty against discipline will not enable us to limit the effects of disciplinary power."[42] Our claim, conversely, is that we cannot limit the effects of sovereign power by strengthening and recovering a social, biopolitical power.

Notes

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Author Information

Melayna Lamb

Melayna Lamb is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Law, London. She is the author of *A Philosophical History of Police Power* (Bloomsbury, 2024) and publishes on questions of sovereignty, violence, and critical theory.

View all of Melayna Lamb's articles.

Tia Trafford

Tia Trafford is Reader at University for the Creative Arts in the United Kingdom. They are author of *Everything is Police* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024) and *The Empire at Home: Internal Colonies and the End of Britain* (Pluto Books, 2020) and coeditor of *Alien Vectors: Accelerationism, Xenofeminism, Inhumanism* (Routledge, 2020) and *Speculative Aesthetics* (Urbanomic/MIT, 2014).

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Article details

Melayna Lamb & Tia Trafford, "Anti-Blackness as Disavowal and Condition: Rethinking Foucault's ," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.8

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

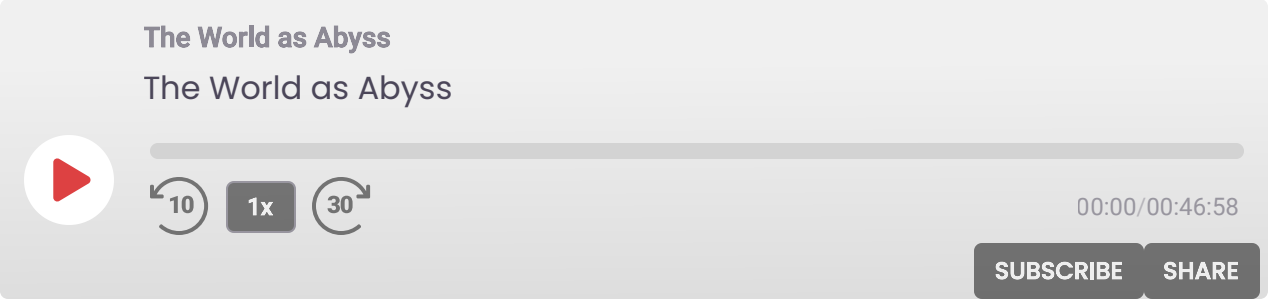
The World as Abyss

by Andrew Culp, Shauna Rigaud, Jonathan Pugh, David Chandler and Richard Todd Stafford | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024), Positions

ABSTRACT Andrew Culp and Cultural Studies Association's Black and Race Studies Working Group Co-Host Shauna Rigaud discuss *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (University of Westminster Press, 2023) with authors Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Richard T. Stafford.

KEYWORDS Anthropocene, Caribbean, critical theory, modernity

Positions, Episode 3



Critique at the End of "the World"

By Richard T. Stafford

Some critical scholars have taken the “Anthropocene” and related concepts as provocations to deconstruct the “human” itself.[1] The false universalism implied by superficial mobilization of the “Anthropocene” concept has often been called into question by cultural theorists, giving rise to various related stories: the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Thanatocene, and so on.[2] At their best, these accounts clarify the relationships between what Elizabeth Povinelli characterizes as the ancestral catastrophes of colonization, enslavement, and so-called primitive accumulation; the ongoing catastrophes of ecocide, exploitation, and dispossession; and the catastrophes to come, if anticipated changes to earth systems do not elicit transformative cultural, political, economic, and technological responses.[3] But a different constellation of critical approaches responds to the crisis of political agency in the Anthropocene by broadening the concept of the social, drawing eclectically on Actor-Network Theory, new materialisms and vitalisms, concepts of the post-human, and indigenous cosmologies in order to deconstruct the culture/nature binary and bring other-than-human agents to the center of their stories.[4] It is from these deconstructive responses that Pugh and Chandler’s intervention departs.

Such stories often explicitly claim that a turn towards non-human agency is necessary in order to make sense of environmental despoliation and climate change during a period characterized by the “seeming collapse of political possibilities,” as Pugh and Chandler put it.[5] Those whom Pugh and Chandler critique make a range of related, but distinct arguments: sometimes baroquely theoretical and sometimes inspiringly concrete; sometimes troublingly apolitical and sometimes grounded in concrete struggles that mobilize alternative cosmologies, visions of community, and conceptions of polity to fight against fossil fuel development, dispossession of indigenous lands, and environmental harm. A kind of political pessimism lurks in the background of many such accounts: in the absence of classes, social movements, or other forms of human collectivity capable of taking on the challenges of our moment, perhaps the only path forward is to enlist in our struggles the relationships and processes that link

humans and other-than-humans together?[6] However, when it comes to responding to climate change, dispossession, environmental despoliation, and exploitation, as Pugh and Chandler argue, it simply is not adequate to "pretend the world is going to do the work."

Pugh and Chandler join critics of the ontological and relational turn, like Elizabeth Povinelli, in arguing that these ostensibly critical ontologies have no necessary political valence, notwithstanding the claims or assumptions of those who adopt these stances.[7] Pugh and Chandler argue that these radically relational perspectives may, in fact, tend to enthrall us too much with the world as it is given, occluding political possibilities that are not legible within the stories modernity tells about itself. What is more, by undertaking forms of critique that are resolutely immanent in "the world," Pugh and Chandler argue, these approaches risk disavowing and failing to take seriously the constitutive roles that historical and ongoing violence play in shaping how "the world" presents and is presented. A different critical standpoint, they argue, is necessary.

For them, this standpoint is found in what they call the abyssal ~~subject~~. The foundational violence of the middle passage violently stripped the abyssal ~~subject~~ of its relationship to "the world." The cuts and exclusions that establish and maintain the global color line continue to deny many the status and capabilities associated with modern political subjectivity. This historical grounding of the abyssal ~~subject~~ in the violence of enslavement and colonialism is a catastrophe, but they argue that it enables a more radical critique of the world as it is.[8] For them, the abyssal ~~subject~~'s emergence from these forces of history provides a standpoint from which to "problematise the human and the world" without "suggesting an alternative, obtainable world beyond."[9] So, the standpoint this ~~subject~~ has towards "the world as abyss" is in stark contrast to those who would reconstruct a world on the basis of a "politics of nature," "a parliament of things," or any of the other approaches to the Anthropocene that maintain continuity with the governing imaginaries of modernity, even as they deconstruct them.[10] The

standpoint of the abyssal ~~subject~~ provides "a groundless-ground for a thorough-going critique" that rejects the lure of "the world," understood not just to include what is empirically given, but also the ontological categories and epistemic grammars that "the world" takes for granted—as well as the various futures or utopian projections we might envision from within in it. In this, Pugh and Chandler draw on scholars like Sylvia Winter and Denise Da Ferreira da Silva who argue that the ontologies, epistemologies, values, and narrative figures taken to produce the effects of knowledge and agency in modernity are often not just historically determined by racial and colonial violence, but inextricably imbricated with—and contingent upon—it.[11]

In listening to their episode of the *Positions* podcast, I imagine many who do cultural studies may—like me—find their scholarly commitments and methodologies called into question. What might Pugh and Chandler's account mean for cultural studies researchers? What could it mean for me to reorient my critical practice towards the end of the world, rather than conducting cultural research and critique as if another world might be possible? What if "the world" itself is the problem?

In their critique of deconstructive, radically relational approaches to the Anthropocene, it is evident that Pugh and Chandler's answer to such questions would involve what they call a "figurative mode of critique." For them, the figure at the center of this all is, of course, the abyssal ~~subject~~, which they consider less as an empirically existing historical figure than a "structural perspective" lacking "ontological security."[12]

To better understand the "figurative mode of critique" as the possible foundation for a method, it might be helpful to consider how they mobilize some of the entailments of this figure's Caribbean origins in their critical interventions. Observing homologies between the deconstructive approach to the Anthropocene and the logics of global development mobilized by institutions like

the World Bank in the Caribbean, they use their figurative approach to suggest that this apparently critical stance reflects and reinforces "imaginaries of governing that enable hegemonic powers to rewrite themselves as not existing or just there." By way of contrast, we might imagine alternatives to Pugh and Chandler's figurative method of making such a case, perhaps proceeding from the homology between the critical discourse and the institutional logic to undertake a genealogy that would demonstrate the emergence of these analogous ideological forms from shared roots; an archaeology that might show the shared conditions of possibility for their similar discursive forms; a historical materialist account that could show how these particular imaginaries emerge from broader class dynamics and political economic structures; etc. Rather than providing accounts such as these, Chandler develops their critique of deconstructive approaches to the human in the Anthropocene by mobilizing another figurative entailment of the abyssal ~~subject~~—the Caribbean carnival:

> But, to my mind, in terms of the Anthropocene, there's a certain sense that it's like an all-day, everyday ontological carnival [. . .] where the positions are reversed, where the mushrooms and the microbes have all the power and humans are subordinate [. . .]. It's that sort of imaginary—that's a deconstructive imaginary, of course—that permanent carnival is a process of opening and disrupting [which] is sort of problematic. I feel this sort of deconstructive imaginary is problematic because the mushrooms and the microbes aren't really ruling. It's a governing imaginary and humans are still ruling other humans, just through a different imaginary of how we should be conforming, behaving, thinking about the mediated links and these sorts of things.

In the first entailment, the figurative move reveals problematic homologies between deconstructive approaches to the Anthropocene and a top-down governing imaginary—neoliberal developmentalism—that has been institutionalized in the empirically-existing Caribbean; in this second entailment, the homology observed is between these same critical practices and the bottom-up improvisational spirit of the Caribbean carnival. At first blush, this might appear

to be a more favorable comparison. But, in their response to Shauna Rigaud's history of carnival and Crop Over festivals in the episode, I understand them to argue that, although the cultural forms of carnival and Crop Over may appear to open up established hierarchies and disrupt norms from below, they are nonetheless subject to recuperation by way of commercialization, commodification, and institutionalization. By this account, while carnival may appear to deconstruct power relations, it is unable to generate lasting change because it is "still taken in by the lure of the world." As in the case of their account of developmentalist governing imaginaries, the figural homology itself is mobilized to do the critical work on the Anthropocene concept, while the material world that gives rise to the figure's entailments is treated as secondary.

For me, as for many in our field, the attraction of the theoretical register is sustained by such evocative points of contact, but also by the frictions and contradictions between the concepts we mobilize and the worlds we study. But, as I understand them, Pugh and Chandler are suggesting a radically different standpoint: I see in their work a provocation to rethink the role of the empirical and how it is mobilized in relation to the conceptual in our field. Considering my own research from this vantage, I wonder: how might my methods of exploring cultural, political economic, and technological responses to climate change be different if, rather than developing them from what appears to be given, I tried to find methods that comport more closely with abyssal sociality? How might I rethink the principles of selection and exclusion, emphasis and de-emphasis, foreground and background that give shape to the stories I tell about flourishing and failing to flourish in a world with a rapidly changing climate, if I tried to tell my stories from a perspective more aligned with Pugh and Chandler's interventions?

While I ask these questions with the specificities of researching climate change and culture in mind, they might also be posed about many of the topics raised in this episode. For instance, when asked to bring their ostensibly Caribbean-inspired "figurative mode of critique" into conversation with the empirical realities

of race and history in the Caribbean, Pugh and Chandler largely demure, apologizing that they are "not drawn literally into the Caribbean as a place."

While I acknowledge and admire their framing of this project as a "beginning" or point of departure, rather than the "end product" of a fully-worked out process, I wonder if—at this stage of its development as a critical practice—the radical suspicion they show towards the "lure of the world" ends up disarticulating their critical voice from the possibility of dialogue with concerns that do not map directly onto their archive. When listening, I wonder at times if the distinction between being "in the world" and being "a product of the world" that they mobilize makes it difficult to bring their concepts to bear on many consequential questions, including some of those that come up during the episode. Considering the provocative implications of their intervention for empirically-grounded critical work in cultural studies, we might fairly wonder how the "world as abyss" could help us understand the kinds of questions Shauna Rigaud raises about actually-existing Caribbean identity, the history of the carnival, and more. Might their suspicion towards the "lure of the world" render it difficult to attend closely to how, in fact, "humans are still ruling other humans"?

But it seems to me that many of their comments both in the podcast and the book show that they take interest in consequential issues that are products of "the world": "there is," they argue, "a desperate shortage of critical engagement which matches the contemporary situation." This, it seems, goes well beyond the history of ideas and the unfolding of critical tendencies. Thus, perhaps the paradoxical work that remains to be done is to bring these concepts into closer contact with the affairs of the world—without being captured by its lure.

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Andrew Culp:** Welcome to Positions, the podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the open source journal Lateral. Positions aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and Lateral Journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes.

[00:00:25] In this episode, the Black and Race Studies Working Group of the CSA hosts . The title of this episode is 'The World as Abyss,' and we are guided by **Shauna Rigaud.** Special guests are Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler. We discuss Pugh and Chandler's work on the Caribbean as an abyssal concept from the insights coming from their 2023 book, *The world as abyss: The Caribbean and critical thought in the Anthropocene* by University of Westminster press. Enjoy.

[00:00:53] Welcome. I'm Andrew Culp. I direct the CalArts Aesthetics and Politics Graduate Program in Teaching Critical Studies. Let's do some quick introductions, beginning with Shauna.

[00:01:04] **Shauna Rigaud:** Hey, everyone. My name is Shauna Rigaud. I am a PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at George Mason University. I am also one of the co chairs for the Black and Race Working Group in the Cultural Studies Association. I'm excited to be here today.

[00:01:22] **Andrew Culp:** Let's continue with Jonathan.

[00:01:23] **Jonathan Pugh:** Hi I'm Jonathan Pugh, and I'm the professor of Island Studies at Newcastle University in the UK.

[00:01:31] **Andrew Culp:** And David.

[00:01:33] **David Chandler:** Hi everyone. I'm David Chandler. I'm a professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster in the UK. I guess I work on the Anthropocene and political ontology type issues.

[00:01:44] **Andrew Culp:** We are so excited to have everyone here today. And why don't I throw it to Shauna, because you've developed such amazing questions to really drive the conversation.

[00:01:53] **Shauna Rigaud:** Thanks so much. Thanks so much. How we can probably start is also kind of talking about, like, just an overview of the book itself.

[00:02:02] **Jonathan Pugh:** As, as an overview of the book *The World is Abyss*, it's kind of getting into recent debates in, in border critical thought that engage the ongoing legacies of, of modernity.

[00:02:13] And these debates are increasingly turning to what in Western thought or European thought, North American thought, have often been thought of as quite liminal spaces. And the Caribbean is obviously one of these. We're very interested in how the Caribbean is kind of becoming increasingly prominent in debates about the ongoing legacies of modernity.

[00:02:33] And what we kind of are trying to do in thinking through the world as abyss, an abyssal ~~subject~~, an abyssal approach to critique, It's perhaps to explore how the ongoing legacies of modernity, the modern subject, the reworlding of the modern subject are perhaps a little more difficult and tricky to engage in and resist in than is often kind of foregrounded in [00:03:00] debates.

[00:03:00] So a lot of what *The World is Abyss* is doing is perhaps critiquing the way in which modernity keeps worlding itself in, in new ways.

[00:03:09] **David Chandler:** Our starting position might be sort of an impasse in critical theory. And me and Jon come at the problematic from our different

disciplines, human geography for Jon and international relations for me.

[00:03:23] And, I guess we're really drawn to the contemporary sort of ontological turn, you might call it, in critical black studies. Seems to be the most exciting sphere of generative thinking. And so we're sort of engaging within that sphere of issues. To sort of think about how that might help us to think about relational ontologies, problems of deconstruction, thinking about Laruelle, non philosophy, a whole range of critical frameworks can really be sort of thought otherwise through critical black studies work. So, in doing that, in looking at those issues, John is, as I said, a human geographer, a Caribbeanist as well. We were very much taken with how the discussions, largely North American slash Canadian discussions, drew very much upon figures of the Caribbean or imaginaries of the Caribbean.

[00:04:19] I mean, many forms of thinking do as well. But so we were just interested in maybe beginning our work of sifting through what's at stake in different ways of thinking about blackness or our ontology, different themes that come through, and sort of thinking about that and how we might then sort of grasp some of those stakes, and how then we might begin to start applying them in our own disciplinary areas.

[00:04:45] So I'm guessing quite often with books. You're, you're looking at an end product to the process, but for us the world is, abyss is very much a beginning, and it's been sort of useful for us to do that work, and we think a different way from which we might take some of those understandings forward. That's, that's really what the book is about.

[00:05:05] It's quite a mediated discussion of how the Caribbean might be drawn upon in certain discussions as we're thinking through how those things work. So the book is very much a book about how ideas might work and how ideas might work differently in order to do different things. So it's not, it's not really literally book about the Caribbean itself.

[00:05:25] That was just, a way in, maybe even an accidental way in.

[00:05:30] **Shauna Rigaud:** One of the things that probably might be helpful is kind of having a broader understanding of some of the, the, the vocabulary and terms that are used throughout the book. So what, what is the abyss, the abyssal ~~subjects~~ in the Anthropocene?

[00:05:46] Cause even in sort of this conversation as we're kind of starting is, there's this constant mention of the Anthropocene. And so wondering just for our listeners to kind of talk about that a little bit too.

[00:05:58] **David Chandler:** The idea of an abyssal ~~subject~~ comes from Glissant's book on, on relation. He starts off at the abyssal middle passage journey and the importance of the constructions of people without subject status.

[00:06:12] The loss of identity holds a grounding. And I personally think that that's really at the conceptual key to the Caribbean as a figurative. The Middle Passage, I think, does a lot of work for the ontological thinking in our contemporary moment, because the basis is that there is a new subject created.

[00:06:36] Now, there's a lot of different discussions, C. L. R. James has a different idea of the subject that's constructed in the Middle Passage. We're really just looking at how a particular imaginary is drawn upon today. That imaginary is that in the Anthropocene, to make the link, Anthropocene is understood, by some people, as the end of modernity, the sort of collapse of the hubris of a telos of progress where we can just reject the piles of bodies, the sort of extraction and the environmental issues. Modernity suddenly becomes re-written as problematic, and with that the epistemological and ontological assumptions that undergirded that and sort of disavowed the violences and dispossessions connected with it.

[00:07:19] But for us, we sort of think the link in contemporary thinking is the crisis of modernity, the crisis of the subject, the universal man, the human, as being able to access the world as objects in a universal way, calls upon a remaking of the subject. I personally think Sylvia Winter's work is fundamental. And so, she questions 1492, the decolonial moment of where we start from in terms of the epistemological wiping out alternative cosmologies and worlds. And she puts the Middle Passage at the center. And in her unpublished *Black Metamorphosis,* the work that the subject without a modern subjectivity does...

[00:08:04] ..is amazing, and it has a futural possibility that realizes that the different identities which were transplanted onto America cannot forge a world, it cannot forge a subject capable of living in the world, particularly in the Anthropocene, where we realize that previous subject projects have failed.

[00:08:22] So the lack of traditional subjectness becomes an asset. In modernity, that's like the worst thing possible. That transformation of what it means to be a subject, the work that the subject can do, the world that that subject relates to and works within, in that transformation, blackness and whiteness begin to be transposed or begin to be problematized.

[00:08:46] Attributes which were not attributes become attributes. And that's sort of the beginning of a set of discussions about what does that mean to be that sort of subject? And how do we sort of think about political ontologies? In different ways.

[00:09:04] **Andrew Culp:** Just a few pages into the book before you set up your own argument and the stakes of the argument, you mentioned a few different theorists, Glissant, who's probably a familiar name to many, Fanon, who's perhaps even a bigger name.

[00:09:16] You begin with this really remarkable block quote from C. L. R. James and you quote: "Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed

a pattern. It is an original pattern. It's not European. It's not African. It's not part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of the word, but West Indian *sui generis* with no parallel anywhere else.

[00:09:40] **Jonathan Pugh:** If you think about someone like Glissant or many other authors, you know, they talk about the idea that the subject is, is kind of barred. It's not available or maybe in the language of Fred Moten, it's dissolved into nothingness in the abyss of the middle passage. So, as David was saying, the question then becomes, does the, does the subject become recouped into a kind of modern framework of reasoning?

[00:10:07] So, if you think about Caribbean independence, and emancipation even before that. For many, obviously, in the Caribbean, it's about this ongoing recouping of the Caribbean, as it were, Blackness into a kind of a liberal modernity. And if you just look at frameworks of the constitution, I think it's fair to say that they were very much about that.

[00:10:27] But what David was talking about are kind of the, the way in which there's an interest in other forms of subjectivity that are different from, from kind of modernity as it were, or the underside of modernity, the abyssal ~~subject~~ becomes this, this kind of barred subject of nothingness. Now we can talk about how that can be framed.

[00:10:47] So for someone– there are different readings of someone like Glissant, but I think it's important to probably talk about how they can be read differently. So some people would read Glissant as kind of a generative thing, so it's about relational becoming and generativity and creolization and carnival, it's all about generativity and affirmation of a different culture.

[00:11:08] But you can read Glissant differently in terms of focusing perhaps more on the opacity of it, the unavailability of the subject, the barred subject and so on. Now we take the abyssal ~~subject~~ in actually a slightly different way, but it's just to

kind of clarify that when Dave is talking about the interest in a subject that's different from that of modernity in the Anthropocene.

[00:11:30] That can be read in different ways and is being read in different ways and I think we're kind of seeking to interject into those debates and try and clarify what we mean by the abyssal ~~subject~~ and so forth.

[00:11:43] **Shauna Rigaud:** I think the idea of the Caribbean as the kind of, centering it as kind of this space, particularly as you mentioned the CLR James quote, right?

[00:11:54] I'm wondering in terms of the Caribbean itself, how do we get to thinking about the Caribbean as, as the place of the abyssal ~~subjects~~, right? Especially in, in kind of thinking about, sort of, the middle passage as a whole, why, why the Caribbean?

[00:12:11] **David Chandler:** In terms of the Caribbean, why the Caribbean? I'm thinking it's slightly arbitrary, even though we can construct the history and the Caribbean as the fulcrum of coloniality and the construction of the world and the construction of a bifurcated world.

[00:12:26] Through the global color line. I wouldn't necessarily go with a sort of a historically determined framework in the particular literature that we're looking at. I think it's much more of a figurative move. I think previously in a more modernist framework of critique of coloniality and racial capitalism...

[00:12:45] Then yes, the Caribbean is also going to be there then, but I'm very keen on the sort of the specificities of the contemporary world. And I have to say, I was relooking at Andrew's little chapter on Afro pessimism and, and non-philosophy, and the sort of, there's an argument already in the world of the, of a paradigmatic positionality that is not in the world, is not lured into the politics of the subject and the politics of identity.

[00:13:13] So you could sort of argue that, there's like a drive already to have an imaginary that enables us to locate a subject without the traits of subjectivity. And so I think different factors come together. I'm not necessarily able to distinguish different ones. Some of them are arbitrary and some of them obviously are less arbitrary.

[00:13:37] But the key point that we were trying to make in the world is this– is that the thinkers that we're thinking through are very much concerned with the debate around our ontology and what the debate around our ontology means different things to different people, some of those things we try and unpack and we've thought further from the work that we were doing.

[00:13:55] The key move like Fred Moten derives, he says, from the work of [00:14:00] Maham Dimitri Chandler, is a difference between real historical people in historical struggles who are racialized and forced onto one side of the color line. And Blackness as a concept that enables us to, to think with and think critically, think otherwise than we would do in, in other frameworks of critique.

[00:14:19] What's going on in that otherness is still pretty much open. How does it relate to Laruelle and French philosophy? How does it relate to Derrida? How does it relate to different frameworks of deconstruction? There's quite a lot at stake in these political ontological discussions of Blackness, which are not rooted in real subjects in history, but obviously they're related to critical, critical struggles.

[00:14:46] And what I want to sort of suggest is that, let's take, say, anti-Blackness rather than ontology. There's different ways into thinking through a vast literature. Let's say there's three types of anti-Blackness, because I like to work in threes. One anti-Blackness might be the racism of the world of modernity, the everyday excessive gratuitous violence and prejudice, you know. The literal, in the literal world, anti-Blackness you know, is, is. Now, in terms of the debates around ontology and fatigue and deconstruction, there might be two other types of anti-blackness.

[00:15:26] There are ways of thinking about an anti-Black world. In one of them, the anti-Black world is the world of representation, the world of all categories in which we are put in boxes, in which we are labeled, in which our individuality is negated. And in order to deal with that world of anti-Blackness, meanwhile engage in a deconstructionist project where we imagine the figurative subject without subject positionality, because it enables us to break all of those, those links and those barriers.

[00:15:55] It promises a world to come. And that world to come is understood, I guess, maybe it's like there's a Black undercurrent or a black underworld or a black real behind the world of oppression and division and the cuts. Now, that already sounds, all the different frames of anti-Blackness are valid and they do work, but they do work in different ways.

[00:16:20] And then the third anti-Blackness. would be a little bit critical of that deconstructionist understanding of the anti-Black world with another world to come underneath it. I was just reading Marcus Bay's *Trans Black Feminism* the other day. I think that they do that, that work really nicely in terms of the deconstructionist promise.

[00:16:43] However, Bay specifically makes the point that this only works when we understand that the world is not unrecoverably anti Black. When we realize in fact the, the, the real is Black, Blackness as excess, that beyond the inability to be captured and represented was in Black pessimism, Afro pessimism, the world as abyss —

[00:17:07] No, it's not—it's doing a different work to the work of deconstruction. It's trying to raise some, some of the stakes of that difference around politics, some of the stakes of that difference around what we mean by para-ontology, some of the stakes of what we mean by anti-Blackness and those sorts of questions.

[00:17:23] Now, those questions, me and John were at the beginning of thinking through, writing that book. For us, writing a book is research. It's more like the end of a journey. And for us, that project, and even looking at the world as it is today, we're, we're, you know we're making some useful moves there, but we're, we're not really completing the project.

[00:17:43] If it could ever be complete.

[00:17:45] **Andrew Culp:** Maybe just to add a little bit more context for some of our listeners too, you know, the metaphysical side for people who are, you know, readers of Spivak's Introduction to Grammatology, in which we get maybe that first strike out of being, that might be familiar. But for our cultural studies readers, maybe it's actually Fanon and that chapter "Black skin, white masks" of the lived experience of the Black man where he's, grows up in Martinique, and has this certain idea of what going to France might be like, where it's this place of promised human rights and equality and sort of like national identity and then he shows up and he is just sort of like, stared at by everybody on the street, including even little girls talking to their, their mothers. And he thinks that they're both like, looking past him and staring at him at the same time. He describes that condition as being trapped between infinity and nothingness.

[00:18:41] And so, what I'm hearing too is that we have a lot of readings that look at the sort of infinity of blackness as the sort of like, thing where there's so much content. It's sort of spilling out. It's hard to control. It can be very generative, but also scary and chaotic. And then there's the sort of nothingness side, [00:19:00] which has been mined a little bit less.

[00:19:01] Like what, what would blackness as nothingness look like? And so that's what I'm sort of hearing in this conversation too.

[00:19:09] **Jonathan Pugh:** Perhaps as with our previous book we did called *Anthropocene Islands*. You kind of just notice that the figure of the island and

island-ness becomes key to debates about the Anthropocene.

[00:19:20] They're all about relational interdependencies and these kinds of things. So it, as a geography, I, it, I'm, I feel it's almost inevitable that certain geographical forms or geography start to rise to the surface in these debates. The same perhaps with the Caribbean when we're talking about the abyss.

[00:19:38] Yeah. You know, it's there. As David was saying, it is almost arbitrary. It's just that perhaps the stakes have been clarified there, or been worked through in a particular way in those geographies. I think there's three ways in which you can think through this anti-Blackness. So if you think about the way in which the constitutions of independence created very liberal subjects, very liberal [00:20:00] modern subjects, and then that creates a kind of literal racism in the world.

[00:20:05] Then you have this kind of second form of perhaps, way of thinking about Blackness as under erasure, precisely because of what's happened there. And the kind of trans Black feminism that David was just talking about, that text there, where it's about the kind of ungraspable force. And this starts with the kind of ungraspable force, perhaps a historical ontology, a social reality that's literally still in the world though.

[00:20:31] So what's being described in these moves of kind of.. or the under commons? They still exist in the world, yeah? They're kind of movements that are, yes, they're ungraspable. Yes. Creolization is ungraspable, carnival is ungraspable, these kinds of things, but they're forces in the, in the world that kind of suggests that there could be a push towards.. and I think they probably use these terms, a more liberatory subject, a more liberation that moves through these things.

[00:20:59] Now for David and I, a kind of meta political mode of critique, or a figurative mode of critique, is concerned with how these are still taken in by the

lure of the world. It's still the world of modernity. If you think about the way, say, Harney and Moten describe the undercommons, there's still, I think it's a beautiful description of how logistical capitalism works.

[00:21:22] Yeah, it's a description, it's an affirmation of how it works. Now for David and I, the kind of, the figurative mode of critique is very much concerned with how these are still taken in by the lure of the world. So we define the abyssal ~~subject~~, as it were, in the text. Yes, it's a, it's a product of the world, but it's not in the world, as it were, in that sense.

[00:21:41] It's kind of.. not available to the cuts and distinctions of these kinds of subjects. So it's a kind of mode of figuratively looking at the way in which the subject still keeps welding itself in the world by taking a lure of the world.

[00:21:57] **Shauna Rigaud:** Well, let's talk about the international relations of it for the Caribbean, and kind of the different policies that are coming to attract different ethnic groups, or even what is happening in the rest of the world that may..

[00:22:12] ..force migration into the region for other ethnic groups. Because we've kind of framed this conversation, right as, as at least in dialogue with Black studies, but there is also this idea that the Caribbean itself, right, is also this collection of imagined Black nations where the Caribbean is..

[00:22:37] ..multicultural. And while we're talking about slavery and the Middle Passage, right, there are also other ways that capitalism has forced migration and labor into the region. So indentured servitude, can also think about the different migration of different ethnic groups, right? The Chinese, all these different [00:23:00] ethnic groups coming into the Caribbean for labor and using the Caribbean, or the Caribbean using them, for labor and building capital.

[00:23:10] When, when we're talking about that kind of nothingness of the abyssal ~~subject~~ that sort of is grounded in the Middle Passage, as you talked about, like how do these other ethnic groups factor in?

[00:23:24] **David Chandler:** I do international relations, I guess, but I don't do literal international relations. I do more about imaginaries of governing, what enables hegemonic powers to rewrite themselves as not existing, or, just there to be enabling and custody building and being nice and unwhitening themselves and de subjectifying themselves.

[00:23:46] Our new regimes of governing and power are sort of projected. For me, that's sort of what's at stake in some of our critical understandings of deconstruction, because it seems to me that deconstruction has moved a long way from 50 years ago, and everyone wants to deconstruct themselves. You know, no one is like, proud of some past and some identity, some great big plan that they're going to impose on people.

[00:24:10] Everyone's sort of saying, no, no, you know, I'm just here for you and differences make differences, basically from a neo-liberalization of the World Bank and the IMF. Where they were just enabling people to do their own programs. Well, I mean, obviously the world looks the same, but the discourses are different.

[00:24:24] So, to my mind, that's what's at stake. And so, in the drive of deconstruction, there's a continual need to unmake the subject to have access to reality or to the world. And it's often understood that Western interveners can work on themselves to remove, to unlearn, to unknow development as a colonial discourse.

[00:24:48] In order to then do empowering work, and the empowering work they do is tending to resilience as a discourse of that, because resilience is not giving you specific capacities or training to do [00:25:00] something. It's really a

process of unlearning so you can be more sensitive, more attuned to changes in your environment, more adaptive. You're working on yourself in order to become in a world..

[00:25:11] ..of entangled and unexpected emergencies. So when we're sort of governed by a critical, deconstructive discourse, it's quite important, I personally think my job is purely a critical one, to think beyond that. I personally found the ontological discussions in Black studies drawing upon an imaginary or a figurative non-subject are able to do that, are able to work through how power can rearticulate itself, even without a world, even without a subject, even in the world of all we do is deconstruct.

[00:25:44] Some people can deconstruct better than others. Surprisingly enough, the same power relations and inequalities, hierarchies are reproduced through that. That's why I need to be thinking about the ontological turn in Black studies, because to me, that's the only space where the critique of deconstruction is real.

[00:26:02] It's grounded. It's historical. It's political. Okay, it's programmatic and figurative. But at the same time, it's, it's literally real, that's what draws me into that. So I apologize that I'm, I'm not drawn literally into the Caribbean as a place, I mean, I read about it and stuff, but that's not really where I'm coming from.

[00:26:22] **Jonathan Pugh:** Coming back to what we were saying earlier, certain geographies do just rise to the surface in these debates. So we were talking about the figure of the island and the Anthropocene that we're looking about. The questioning, you know, the questioning of the subject or the undoing of the subject that comes about through certain debates that are making their way up to North America through the Caribbean and writers like Gleeson and Brathwaite and to a certain extent Walcott, Fanon and so on.

[00:26:45] This is why they become so key. Let's take Benito Rojo, you know, writing about the Caribbean, the repeating island that expands out into the world.

That could very nicely be a metaphor for what you were talking about, Shauna. The elsewhere that undoes itself. This is how creolization has been framed. So when Benito Rojo talks about carnival, because of, I'll mention that because I know that's something you care deeply about, you can look at that in so many different ways, but there's an opacity to it.

[00:27:10] It's about the undoing of the subject, the unavailability of carnival to cuts and distinctions. If you start putting cuts and distinctions into carnival, you're, you're enacting a violence, yeah? But the carnival itself is also, it repeats the island, repeats the cuts and distinctions that expand out into the world, yeah?

[00:27:25] It's, it reveals them as kind of a falseness, yeah? So they're a raised subject. This is another way of maybe thinking about nothingness, Andrew. It becomes that force in the world, but that becomes then a literal force in the world that can be operationalized and kind of put to work as a kind of, in a sense, a liberatory movement.

[00:27:43] **Shauna Rigaud:** When we're talking about carnival itself in the Caribbean, we start with Trinidad.

[00:27:48] And so Trinidad itself had a history of a few kind of, colonial rulers, right? So it starts with the Spanish who were really unable to get the kind of planter system that other islands were profiting off of, particularly the British, and then invites the French to come and settle and start plantations on the island.

[00:28:14] And it's with the French, particularly, that the tradition of carnivals begins on the island with the planter elite class holding these masquerades and balls, right, just before Lent. So carnivals are a pre-Lenten festival or celebration, to then prepare yourself for the fast. What happens in Trinidad is really interesting because then there is a number of ways that the enslaved on the island began to participate in their own kind of festivals.

[00:28:46] And we know just theoretically with Bakhtin talking about carnival and the carnivaless as sort of the world upside down, right? And so even with the elite planter class participating in the carnival, the kind of ways that they use masquerade both embody different power structures in there. And what you see with the enslaved population participating as well, they then were mocking their masters and participating in this kind of upside down. When the British take over the island, they come from a very different understanding of the role of religion. Catholicism allows for a little bit more flexibility for the Anglican Church, which is rooted where the British rule from. They did not see religion as a tool for expression or a space for expression, or sort of releasing the kind of social vows that carnival does.

[00:29:47] But rather, they saw that as a space for control. And so when the British take over the island, you can clearly see the cultural ways that the two rulers kind of set off. So once Britain takes over the island, there is a banning of carnival celebrations for the enslaved population. Even after emancipation, the British are still trying to surveille and keep those celebrations by the Black population..

[00:30:17] They prohibit those celebrations by Blacks on the island. And what then erupts are what they call the Canboulay riots, right? So there are riots around the country where the Black population are engaged in these protests about participating in the carnival experience itself. And that then marks carnival as grounded in an Afro..

[00:30:41] ..Trinidad, Tobago, or Trinbago as a term to describe the two islands. That then marks it as an Afro-Trinbagonian experience. So, Crop Over itself has a different history, where there is less of a bottom up approach to the festival itself. So [00:31:00] Crop Over originates similarly, right, in the pre-emancipation time.

[00:31:07] So, there began around 1786. Dinners and dances that were allowed by the enslaved from the planters to celebrate the end of the sugarcane crop, the

end of the harvest. These kinds of celebrations in its practice become very creolized because they start off as just kind of dinner and dancing, and then they start to incorporate more, sort of West African traditions..

[00:31:36] ..along with a British tradition. Originally, the name of those celebrations was called Harvest Home, which actually harkened back to a harvest celebration that happened in England. Because we understand, like, Agrarian societies traditionally had these practices of celebrating the end of harvest. And so this practice was familiar to the [00:32:00] enslaved, but also familiar to the planters.

[00:32:02] And they named it Harvest Home, right? Trying to sort of take that in. And so for Harvest Home, that again, that kind of bottom up is flipped, right? So this comes from the planter as a way to celebrate it. The Harvest Home celebrations were celebrations that happened sort of at different plantations across the island by the 1800s.

[00:32:19] And really, interestingly, even in spite of the outlawing and the banning of drums that you see across, kind, of British colonial islands in the 1800s, too, but these kind of celebrations are able to be had, un Barbados, only in the spaces where planters could observe. It was against the law to have any sort of faces that were just the enslaved population or before, prior to emancipation.

[00:32:50] As the island moves kind of from being Great Britain's most profitable sugar island, the plantations kind of decrease and you [00:33:00] see in the history of the Harvest Home Festival that the celebration starts to decline in the 1940s, although there is some archival evidence that sees that the Harvest Home Festival is still practiced in sort of smaller villages up until the 1960s.

[00:33:16] By the 1960s, there's also a move to start a carnival in Barbados itself, but among the elite Black class on the island, and mixed race class on the island,

and white class on the island. And so, they start these carnival celebrations in the sixties, but that dies out very quickly. Barbados gets its independence in 1966.

[00:33:42] By 1974, they start the Crop Over celebration, which they start to develop as a calling back to the Harvest Home celebrations, right? So there's now a need.. There are actually two really interesting stories about how [00:34:00] Crop Over starts, but, the one that kind of sits most atop all of them is that the Barbados Board of Tourism wanted to create a tourist event to start to fill the hotels.

[00:34:12] And so, in 1974, they developed this idea of Crop Over, hearkening back to the Harvest Home celebrations, and then incorporate the same sort of masquerade balls and fairs into the three week long event. What happens in 1974 is really interesting though, because the crop over celebration starts to incorporate where they have, sort of street kind of fair, where the island's population kind of come through and see that and start to call this and recognize this as a Barbadian thing and kind of reclaim it in a way that probably the tourism board did not..

[00:34:52] ..think about, right? So what then kind of develops is Crop Over. In essence, there's a turn where it's [00:35:00] in the early days of the celebration. There's a turn where it moves from just this tourism, right? Just this thing to fill the hotels during the slow season to something that is for the island's population, that is for the people.

[00:35:15] It's a, it's a recognition point.

[00:35:17] **Jonathan Pugh:** I think that plays in very nicely, I mean, whether you're talking about, say, something like the landship in Barbados for Crop Over or tea parties, is that, you know, all these different things, perhaps the way into what you're, you're talking about is this, for the scholars that were writing around the time of Derek Walcott and Glissant and so on, you would get things like the

argument being made that the banning of the African drum leads to the discovery of the steel drum, which leads to the point is improvisation emerges from violence, yeah?

[00:35:47] So perhaps what we're interested in is the way in which that improvisation gets enrolled. I think improvisation, as a, if you just think, I'm just gonna, just the end here of Benito Rojo on Carnival, where he talks about [00:36:00] improvisation being absolutely key to all this stuff and emerging from the banning of this, the violence of this, and so on.

[00:36:05] It reaches a point where, and it's interesting, he says, he frames it as calling it in a certain kind of way. So the rhythm moves and such as the carnival moves, to such extent, where there's a shifting totality that leads to perceive the impossible unity, the absent locus, the center that has taken off yet is not there.

[00:36:23] Philip writes some really nice stuff on carnival as well, which we've engaged in the book. And just thinking about what you were saying, Shauna, I think perhaps the certain kind of way that we're interested in, in framing Carnival is this kind of ontological insecurity that ends up being enrolled in these debates.

[00:36:39] So the way in which it kind of works to disrupt the grasping hand, even as it's the product of it. But going back to what we were discussing earlier. And I think you've probably perfectly illustrated this, Shauna, with your way in which the kind of improvisation gets captured. Is there a liberatory force attached to this?

[00:36:59] The Landship is pretty much dying out in Barbados. It was very central to the emergence of social welfare organizations in the early 1900s, late 1800s, emerged, analytically speaking, you could say it was quite similar to Carnival in terms of the creolization framing that could go on. But there's a commodification quite quickly that perhaps illustrates precisely the point..

[00:37:22] ..that the liberatory force of undoing, it may be precisely what's captured, as it were.

[00:37:28] **David Chandler:** Yes, maybe like carnival is read in so many different ways, it's been so important for different political projects and programs. But to my mind, in terms of the Anthropocene, there's a certain sense that it's like an all day, every day ontological carnival, you know, where the positions are reversed, where the mushrooms and the microbes..

[00:37:47] ..Have all the power, and you know, humans are subordinate to mercy. It's that sort of imaginary, that's a deconstructive imaginary, of course, that permanent carnivore's process of opening and of disrupting. This sort of problem, I feel, like all these deconstructive imaginaries. It's sort of problematic because the mushrooms and the microbes aren't really ruling.

[00:38:09] It's, it's a governing imaginary and humans are still ruling other humans, just through a different imaginary of like, how we should be conforming, behaving, thinking about the mediated links and these sorts of things. And so I sort of feel that different conceptual frameworks, different times, different imaginaries play different roles.

[00:38:29] And obviously we have our different interests and our different disciplines as well. But I sort of think that thinking through the use of carnival as deconstruction and the work that that does in different conceptual frameworks is sort of where I'm thinking about it. I mean, what an, what an amazing thing.

[00:38:46] And as you say, the empirics of it, the historical differences, you know, you can just see how that will become such an important paradigm to work in and think through.

[00:38:56] **Jonathan Pugh:** I mean, there is the argument that a number of Caribbean writers made when Derrida came out that we were doing

deconstruction a long time before you, and I think there's something in that and extremely interesting to think through those parallels I guess at some point. But Shuana, I really appreciate the way you describe that, it's such food for thought that history and yet do you not find it just repeats itself that kind of history, that repeating island, as it were.

[00:39:19] You know, I've come back to Benito Rojo more recently. I know I wasn't sure if he fell out of favor, but we found him extremely useful for our *Abyssal* book. In terms of just really getting to that improvisational thing, the undoing of stuff and the way in which, yeah, the cuts and distinctions constantly repeat themselves and are forged through the Caribbean and in a way that I just found so fascinating about the ways you were describing Barbados and Trinidad Carnival.

[00:39:44] **Andrew Culp:** It also strikes me that as much as things have changed, you know, Fanon writing *Wretched of the Earth* and in the 60s, it feels like we're still asking similar questions, though maybe asking them even harder or deeper or with more tragedy or concern, because it seems like the negative gesture of the anti colonial is still here. We know that's where things have to begin. But then the question of the post colonial and how that moment of transition from things being withheld or restricted, this absolute gratuitous violence of the colonial regime, and then how to really escape it and what happens beyond? What's that transition?

[00:40:23] Does it mean just recapturing things within a national culture? Does it mean to rule or rule differently or not even rule at all? And how might cultural traditions that come out of a moment of rebellion and uprising and resistance that are maybe even just negative gestures like marronage, where, you know, you escape, or maybe even this sort of like relative escape where you're helping others escape in the process. What do you do when you've all escaped?

[00:40:49] What happens in that future? Is, is there a positive gesture? Do you renew those older traditions or is there something else that has to happen? You know, I think that I've been writing recently about how we need to sit in that

moment of negation because maybe it's just not as deep or as complete as we really think that it is, that simply just affording people civil and political rights isn't enough to really undo these whole worlds of violence.

[00:41:10] **Jonathan Pugh:** No, in fact, the opposite, in my opinion. The awarding of rights, whether it's through a relation, a political relation, an ethical relation, a legal relation, as the constitutions of Barbados in 1966 perfectly illustrated, is precisely a recuperation of Blackness. And perhaps also, as is some of the other stuff we were talking about as well, and I think, as you were doing, I think you probably started to describe there what we're trying to think through with the motive metapolitical critique, you know, trying to sit a bit more with that. I'm not sure, I don't know what David thinks about the word negativity. It's kind of been used in a lot of different ways lately. I think maybe used so much, a bit like with non-relation, that we're trying to think through other ways in which we could frame these debates.

[00:41:56] But I think we see our task as sitting with it, as you were saying, you know, trying to develop figurative positions that enable us to sit with it, that perhaps don't become over celebratory, over affirmational, over celebratory. And we've done a lot of work on the Anthropocene in that regard. And perhaps we're now turning to certain aspects that are turned into the non-ontological and thinking through how perhaps also some of those are a little bit over celebratory as well.

[00:42:21] **David Chandler:** I prefer abyssal, the negative stuff, surprisingly enough. And, and we sort of rehearsed some of the reasons. I mean, I mean, Harmon does enough work for anyone to think through that what happens in the granting of rights is merely that you're not oppressed, in a way that like the capitalist liberal state recognizes a division like that, but nothing necessarily changes.

[00:42:46] And that's why the problems are metapolitical rather than political. And then that sort of relates to the problems of the world and the subject and the limitations of deconstruction, because the deconstructionist imaginary is really an [00:43:00] imaginary that politics understood as forms of representation of knowledge as well as a form of politics, is the barrier and that underneath that, there's something else.

[00:43:09] So the idea of maroonage or freedom from, in our contemporary moment, does a lot of work for not necessarily the same sort of projects that we here might necessarily be involved in. And to my mind, it's those ways of thinking that are like so crucial. And you're always caught in the trap of critiquing, being negative, deconstructing, and, you know, and before you know it, you're just so born to the microbes and the mushrooms or, whatever the imaginary of the world is. Which is why the programmatic distancing from that, Laruelle's project, the given politics, given reality.

[00:43:46] That's really what I think.. there's people like myself, maybe other people, are sort of are looking for in these discussions. I'm not trying to do critical Black studies or make points within it, but I'm thinking that there is a desperate shortage of critical engagement, which matches the contemporary situation where there isn't a political subject available.

[00:44:06] But that doesn't mean that we just have to pretend that the world is going to do the work instead of humans. That's not going to happen. And that's, to me, is the crux of where we are.

[00:44:15] **Jonathan Pugh:** I was just going to add very briefly to that. There's a certain technique evolving as well in kind of the more affirmational debates, the more generative celebratory debates, that labels the kind of more metapolitical critique as something that's insufficient. And it's a very nice way of kind of annulling critique. We just need to get on and focus on the celebration of the world, yeah? And I think the lure of the world, as David was saying, is precisely the

problem. The world is the problem. And to focus on the world as this generative thing that just keeps giving forces of non relation, forces of relation, ungraspable forces, might be precisely the problem. And I think Shauna's, I'm just going to repeat this, I think Shauna's description was just wonderful of that history. It couldn't have demonstrated it better, the way in which the improvisation gets constantly recouped. And I don't think just sitting in improvisation is necessarily the answer to resist that.

[00:45:09] **Shauna Rigaud:** Thank you, Jonathan and David for this conversation today. I think that and, and the book, as a way for us to think about the kinds of thought that folks have come both to the Caribbean with, and about the Caribbean, for having sort of . . . thinking about subject making and ideas of modernity. I think this is a great place for us to start thinking about, sort of broadly as well.

[00:45:40] **Andrew Culp:** On behalf of the CSA and the Positions podcast. I just want to thank David and Jonathan for taking the time to talk with us today. It's been incredibly generous thinkers. And I think that this conversation was quite excellent. On behalf of the Cultural Studies Association and Positions Podcast, enormous thank you to our guests today, and also a special shout out to the production team, including Mark, Elaine, and many others, and look forward to more podcasts coming soon. Thank you so much.

Credits

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Music by Matt Nunes < https://open.spotify.com/artist/5r7EEqpB7cPsBRRV9ek1Ia?si=hdJkJavJQtid6R1VrkJDLg> .

[Editors' note: This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

1. The "Anthropocene" concept originated in the geological sciences, but was quickly reterritorialized into a range of other scientific and cultural debates. Those taking up non-human agency, the "ontological turn," and the deconstruction of the "human" are the focus for Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, but they represent just one part of a much broader discourse. See Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2023) https://doi.org/10.16997/book72 < https://doi.org/10.16997/book72> ; Paul J. Crutzen,"The 'Anthropocene'" in *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, eds. Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2006), 13–18, https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-26590-2_3 < https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-26590-2_3> ; Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill. "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (March 13, 2011): 842–67, https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327 < https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327> ; Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519, no. 7542 (March 2015): 171–80, https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258 < https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258> ; Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). ↩

2. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso Books, 2015); Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (April 2014): 62–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291 < https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291> ; Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, … Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (May 2019): e12438, https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438 < https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438> ; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Donna Haraway, Noboru Ishikawa, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing, and Nils Bubandt, "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene," *Ethnos* 81, no. 3

(May 26, 2016): 535–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838 < https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838> ; and Julia Adeney Thomas, "The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 458–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1320142 < https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1320142> .

3. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

4. An exhaustive bibliography of this tendency is beyond the scope of this response, but germinal texts include: Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 1–18; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548 < https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548> ; and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

5. Pugh and Chandler's formulation resonates closely with the claims about "capitalist realism" that have circulated in cultural studies for more than a decade. See Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 92; and Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

6. Many critics would take issue with the stance advanced by Pugh and Chandler that there "isn't a political subject available" to respond to our "contemporary situation," even though most seem to grapple with the "seeming collapse of political possibilities" in relation to climate change. It is indeed the case that among critical, scientific, and even many activist voices, one often gets the sense that pessimism of the intellect has completely overwhelmed optimism of the will when it comes to climate change. Even so, a range of perspectives continue to emphasize the role of the working class and social movements as political agents. See Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (New York: Verso Books, 2021); Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (New York: Verso Books, 2022); Paul Hampton, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity: Tackling Climate Change in a Neoliberal World* (London: Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732220 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732220> ; and Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (New York: Verso Books, 2021).

7. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground*.

8. Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 55–58.

9. Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 58.

10. While I use phrases from Latour here, I gesture at the broader tendency that Pugh and Chandler critique, of which Latour's approach is just one influential example. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Caroline Porter (Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

11. In mentioning some of these important tributaries to their thinking, I should mention that the critical watershed on which they draw in their syntheses and original critiques is truly vast. See Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022) and Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015 < https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015> .
12. Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 2.

Author Information

Andrew Culp

Andrew Culp teaches media history and theory in the MA Program in Aesthetics and Politics and the School of Critical Studies at CalArts. His published work on media, film, politics, and philosophy has appeared in *Radical Philosophy*, *parallax*, *angelaki*, and *boundary 2* online. He serves on the Governing Board of the Cultural Studies Association. In his first book, *Dark Deleuze* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), he proposes a revolutionary new image of Gilles Deleuze's thought suited to our 24/7 always-on media environment, and it has been translated into numerous languages including Spanish, Japanese, and German.

View all of Andrew Culp's articles.

Shauna Rigaud

Shauna Rigaud is a PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies at George Mason University. Her research focuses on Caribbean culture and economy, performance and performativity, Black feminism, and Caribbean feminism. She holds a BA in African American Studies from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a Master's in both Gender/Cultural Studies and Communication Management from Simmons University.

View all of Shauna Rigaud's articles.

Jonathan Pugh

Jonathan Pugh is Professor of Island Studies at Newcastle University, UK. He leads the Anthropocene Islands initiative.

View all of Jonathan Pugh's articles.

David Chandler

David Chandler is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, UK. He edits the open access journal *Anthropocenes: Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*.

View all of David Chandler's articles.

Richard Todd Stafford

Richard Todd Stafford is a scholar studying culture, energy, and the climate change. He serves as the director of communications in the Honors College, the concentration head for the Masters in Interdisciplinary Studies in Energy and Sustainability, and the organizer of the Center for Humanities Research Environmental Justice reading group at George Mason University. He earned his PhD in Cultural Studies from George Mason University, where he specialized in culture and political economy and the cultural study of science and technology.

View all of Richard Todd Stafford's articles.

Article details

Andrew Culp, Shauna Rigaud, Jonathan Pugh, David Chandler, Richard Todd Stafford, "The World as Abyss," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.6

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Introduction – Feeding the Civic Imagination

by Do Own (Donna) Kim, Sangita Shresthova and Paulina Lanz

| Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Food is a powerful entry point into the civic imagination—i.e., the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions, the social process of which fosters a shared vision for collective action. As an essential material component of human life, food exists as an extremely mundane and dynamic aspect of our everyday personal and social experiences; our relationship with food is intertwined with issues of privilege, access, representation, language, ethnicity, and the materiality of culture. This forum explores diverse intersections between food and civic imagination, with topics ranging from shared memories, local (re-)imaginations, history and civic action, and private-public translations. The forum discusses how food sustains, nourishes, and connects individuals and their communities by delving into both their presence—e.g., acquiring and preparing ingredients, cooking meals, sharing or selling foods—and absence—e.g., hunger and human waste in food ecology. Articles in this collection demonstrate that the civic imagination is not only fed in dining rooms and kitchens but also in less conventionally thought-of contexts, such as digital spaces, toilets, and forums such as ours. They urge us to engage with food in new imaginative ways, fostering and bridging conversations: one cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like, and one must explore together to navigate and actualize the imaginative possibilities.

KEYWORDS civic engagement, civic imagination, food

The story of this forum begins in mid-March 2020, when we, like many others, experienced our first COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown. As members of Civic Paths,[1] a research group based at the University of Southern California, we had to move all our meetings and work online overnight. Even as we struggled as scholars, practitioners, and humans, we also sought out our meetings as a space

where we could just be together and share what we were experiencing in our bodies, the losses we lived with, and what we needed to do to cope day-to-day. In short, we felt a need to connect with each other. We soon noticed that many of our conversations revolved around food—baking it, eating it, sharing it, missing it, and, at times, dreaming about it. This was so much so that we decided to end the year with a (then virtual) remixing stories activity that centered food, recipes, and memory. We invited others to join us as we came together to share memory-filled ingredients and create new recipes for imagined guests. We also committed to a more sustained focus on food in our work, an agreement that ultimately charted the path to this forum, which was edited by a team within Civic Paths.

Based at the University of Southern California and founded in 2009, our research group focuses on the continuities between participatory cultures and civic engagement with a commitment to understanding how the process of collective imagining allows us to tap the *civic imagination*. In our work, we define civic imagination as the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; one cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like.[2] An essential element of civic imagination is the individual's ability to understand themselves as civic agents capable of enacting change. However, civic imagination must also be explored with others; one must gain respect and understanding for the perspectives of others and ultimately navigate imaginative possibilities with the communities one comes from or chooses to belong to. Civic imagination is a social, rather than individual, process from which emerges a shared vision that we act together to achieve. Civic imagination is a way to express desires for liberation or equity that may not be fully realized yet; it is also a framework to guide the process of such radical change. Like Paulo Freire we believe that "imagination is not an exercise for those detached from reality, those who live in the air. On the contrary, when we imagine something, we do it necessarily conditioned by a lack in our concrete reality."[3] In other words, civic imagination helps us access and understand a key

generative dimension of social change, bringing visioning and creativity to the challenging issues we face.[4]

We see our work on civic imagination in dialogue with several theoretical and applied socially oriented approaches that center the imagination. Stephen Duncombe's work on "open utopias" has been particularly helpful in helping us articulate the important role that charting paths that matter even if the end goal is beyond our reach.[5] Similarly, Mary Warnock's work on the imagination as a mechanism that helps us "think of certain objects in the world in a new way: as signifying something else."[6] As such, we see ourselves as working in conversation with thinkers who center the imagination in social justice efforts, including those working on the pragmatic imagination,[7] the radical imagination,[8] and significantly the rich insights generated by those engaged with Afrofuturism.[9] We see the civic imagination as a concept that supports a clearer articulation of how shared cultural practices connect to a collective process of imagining that bumps up against and renders visible existing constraints.

Our understanding of food as a powerful entry point into the civic imagination is also deeply rooted in cultural studies where food is intertwined with issues of privilege, access, representation, language, ethnicity, and the materiality of culture. Food is also a part of our intellectual experience as our relationship to food is shaped by the meanings we bestow upon it. Whether it is appropriated or interpreted across multiple regions and cultures, food also plays a role in understanding and contesting culture. In this forum, we bring together concrete food-centered examples that surface tangible and imagined meanings. Food can nourish and inspire us. Food can be used to shame us.[10] Food can connect us to each other. Food can divide us. Food can remind us of the past. It can also inspire us to think about the future and to imagine culinary possibilities, even as we encounter real-world constraints, tensions, and challenges. Often food does all of this at the same time. We think of imagination as a force with power, and collective imaginations as civic arenas where serious issues can be explored,

critiqued, and aspirational futures can be crafted through, among other things, eating, cooking, and baking.

Whether it is cooking a recipe passed down over generations, fighting food injustice, interrogating authenticity,[11] valuing the fleeting experience of a shared meal, relearning how we relate to what we eat, exploring a flavor combination learned over YouTube, or deepening the connections we make by sharing our bakes on social media in the midst of a pandemic lockdown, food has the power to connect, challenge, and inspire us. As such, we see ourselves in dialogue with other publications that have emerged in this space including the "Food, Popular Culture, and the COVID-19 Pandemic" special issue of the Popular Culture Studies Journal published in 2022.[12] With mindfulness towards how food has historically often been used in framing racist, gendered, ableist, fatphobic, heteropatriarchal, colonialist, and ethnonationalist imaginings of civic participation,[13] we want to understand how collective energies and shared emotions in relation to food to pave the way for tangible social change. It is not about choosing one food item over another. It is about reaffirming and challenging our beliefs in the power of food to protect our rights and fight for justice. It is about charting paths through the creative, ambivalent, or painful ways that food shows up in our lives. As such, we believe that exploring the intersection between food and the civic imagination makes a valuable contribution to the fast-growing field of food and culture, in which "food links body and soul, self, and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic."[14]

This forum is intended to be an invitation for further conversation that considers how we might approach, parse, and further interrogate the intersection of food and civic imagination.

As such, it brings together short articles that discuss diverse intersections between food and civic imagination, with topics ranging from shared memories, glocal (re-)imaginations, history and civic action, and private-public translations.

The range of topics covered is intentionally broad and multifaceted so as to reveal and engage points of entry for further future explorations of this rich topic. As an essential material component of human life, food exists as an extremely mundane and dynamic aspect of our everyday personal and social experiences; it sustains, nourishes, and connects individuals and their communities. In organizing this forum, we hoped to "feed" the readers' civic imagination by conversing with articles that touch on various food practices within and across borders. This includes not simply those that discuss the act of eating, but also those that engage with acquiring and preparing ingredients, cooking meals, sharing or selling foods, and even their absence—i.e., hunger and how human waste relates to their ecology.[15]

In this way, this forum embodies an important ethos of cultural studies: "culture is ordinary."[16] The forum inspires "ordinary" food-related traditions and practices to be explored as what are entangled with the socio-material conditions of particular groups,[17] and therefore both as the sites of "struggle[s] for and against a culture of the powerful" and "the stake to be won and lost" during it,[18] captured through civic imagination.[19] This aim is reflected in the style of this forum's essays. The essays in this forum are intellectually rich and draw on diverse interdisciplinary literature such as food studies and cultural anthropology.[20] We connect these explorations with civic imagination and cultural studies' attention to the everyday through integrating personal narrative with cultural analysis. We encouraged the contributors to be imaginative with their writing as well, and the forum includes academic essays, educational modules, recipes, microhistories, and personal recollections that delve into the connections between civic imagination and food through a combination of theory and poetry. As a result, the forum serves various insightful and "delectable" essays for the readers to create their own version of a multi-course meal. Pushing the food metaphor further, we also complemented these articles with three Feeding the Civic Imagination blog conversations on intercultural food < http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/8/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-one-elaine-almeida-and-lisa-silvestri> , digital media and food <

http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/17/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-two-brienne-flemming-and-ioana-mische> , and the Great British Bake Off < http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/17/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-three-the-great-british-bake-off> that were published earlier in 2022 and can be found at *Pop Junctions*.[21] The range of the topics in the forum unsettles the ordinariness of food's deep, broad integration into our everyday lives, as well as provokes the question of "whose everyday life?" in navigating it.[22] This, in turn, urges the question of "whose civic imagination, and for whom?" The lens of civic imagination involves identifying the locus, reach, and consequences of collective imagination and/or strategizing through such an identification, instead of merely detecting the presence of an imaginative component in "ordinary" food practices. As such, the articles included in this collection make a collective statement about the complex role that imagining, particularly an experiential imagining, can play in the further conceptualization of a dynamic and multilayered, and even contradictory, civic imagination rooted in shared cultural practices.

Several of the articles in this collection explore cooking as it encourages us to (re-)imagine the present through our past personal and historical memories, with the sensorial experiences that can nourish our future selves. As Luce Giard wrote, "doing-cooking is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the 'family saga' and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons."[23] In that vein, Jana Stöxen's "Passing Down and Following up: Jewish Cuisine's Umbrella Potential" published through *Pop Junctions* discusses how collective culture can be imagined and maintained without a clear, explicit structure through the example of Jewish cuisine.[24] The case study traces religious and cultural belonging through local variations of Jewish cuisine, focusing on how cultural heritage can function as symbolic resources for cooperative, inclusive exchange around identities and civic participation. Sulafa Zidani and Paulina Lanz's contribution, "A Pinch of Imagination," < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/a-

pinch-of-imagination-lanz-zidani/> demonstrates how collaborative imagination can be achieved in practice through a recipe that traverses both authors' cultural, ethnic backgrounds—Palestinian and Mexican, respectively—and personal, familial memories. The reader is invited to join in by sharing their own recipes, building memories, and communicating with meaning. As the authors observe, "An appreciation for the practices and historical significance is another act of civic engagement and imagining otherwise. Imagination can pass along these memories and cultural expressions".

Yet, as Giard also noted, intimate food-related knowledge has also been culturally rendered as belonging to private, female spheres despite the multiple skills and creativity cooking requires.[25] Kris Chi's article, "From Housewives to Homemakers: Civic Engagement, Imagination, and Déjà Vu in Taiwan," < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/from-housewives-to-homemakers-civic-engagement-imagination-taiwan-chi/> tells the Story of Civic Engagement in Food in Taiwan" explores the history of Homemakers United Foundation (HUF) to surface how Taiwanese housewives' civic imagination was connected to their interest in healthy eating and environmentally friendly consumption. Chi explains how the members claimed their "ordinary mother" identity to encourage more women to participate in social issues. The article urges readers to look beyond the public-private dichotomy and the tendency to disassociate civics from the private sphere.

Food is associated with absence, just as much as it is with abundance, and utopian visions can cast long shadows that obscure inequities, prejudice, and lack, situations that summon the counter-imagination and provoke us to ask "what else" and "how else" as we engage our creativity.[26] Erica Leigh's "'Cooking in Someone Else's Kitchen': Exploring Food as a Commonplace for Antiracist Pedagogy, White Allyship, and Feeding Civic Imagination" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/cooking-in-someone-elses-kitchen-food-antiracist-pedagogy-white-allyship-leigh/> is a practice-

centric contribution that proposes a social justice-motivated curriculum for educators, particularly white educators who want to reflect on their positionality and encourage intersectional, historically rooted anti-racist discussions in their classrooms. The article includes detailed examples of materials, assignments, and lesson goals to help educators and allies bring this approach into classrooms. Offering a personal perspective, Briana Ellerbe's "They Broke Bread with Sincere Hearts: Imagining New Gymnastics Cultures" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/they-broke-bread-with-sincere-hearts-imagining-new-gymnastics-cultures-ellerbe/> reflects on the author's embodied experiences as a professional gymnast who dealt with restrictive food practices in high-pressure competitive athlete culture. The author also shares subversive practices aimed at warding off hunger, providing a rare insight into everyday experiences of gymnasts. Told by a gymnast-scholar, the article highlights an empowering community strategy to reclaim agency over one's body within a situation of abuse and exploitation. Ellerbe uses the "breaking bread" metaphor and argues for centering collective imaginative practices around everyday symbols to imagine alternatives and foster cultures of care. She states, "Breaking bread can be viewed as an act of solidarity and a breaking down of existing power structures within the sport in an effort to imagine more loving and safer gymnastics cultures."

The civic imagination is not fed only in dining rooms and kitchens. It can also flourish in other less conventionally thought-of contexts, such as digital spaces and toilets. Jennifer Shutek's "Holy Wine Online: Deir Cremisan in Digital Space" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/holy-wine-online-deir-cremisan-digital-space-shutek/> focuses on the Deir Cremisan Facebook page as a civic imagination site, stressing that its positioning as an "apolitical" place helps involved communities—including the Indigenous makers, local workers, supportive customers, and interested international parties—connect around Palestinian solidarity both materially and discursively. The article draws on the author's ethnographic research to demonstrate how the Facebook page

administrators facilitate the civic imagination through what may, at first glance, seem to be an apolitical space. As Shutek comments, it is a place "that avoids overtly political digital activism to creatively resist Israeli structures of occupation, imagining a winery that does not live in the shadows of a separation barrier." Pushing our thinking about how the civic imagination applies to the food cycle, Daren Shi-chi Leung's piece "Shit in Our Time: An Unsettling Epoch of Metabolic Disturbance" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/shit-in-our-time-metabolic-disturbance-leung/> describes the metabolic intimacy between humans and soil by positioning the sociotechnical system of (re-)processing "humanure" in the cyclical ecology of food and waste. In this piece, Leung draws on the history of socialist Chinese toilet system to connect diverse actors that represent the network of the food system, including those that capture rural-urban and human-nonhuman dynamics. Microhistories of Leung's family members who worked as "humanure" laborers and were constituents of the larger ecology surrounding this practice urge us to listen to diverse human and non-human actors that share our space.

Read together, the articles included in this forum expand our understanding of the intersection of food and civic imagination. This cultural studies and civic imagination project encourages the readers to trace the dynamic relations hidden beneath the seeming ordinariness of food practices and to collectively imagine the ways that these relations can be analyzed and restructured. They engage historical accumulations, personal experiences, and creative impulses that traverse social, embodied, and economic boundaries. As such, we believe they make a meaningful contribution to the cultural studies field at a time when there is, as Jonathan Gross reminds us, "much to be gained from developing new ways of creatively extending temporal horizons: imagining possible, plausible, probable and preferred futures, and reactivating multiple pasts."[27] From manure to hunger, from cooking to civic action, from nostalgic to glocal (re-)imaginations, and from recipes to pedagogies, this forum invites readers to engage in the complex relationships between food, culture, and human and non-human actors, thereby

charting new epistemologies. As this forum evidences, food-inspired imagination also fosters conversation, and each article calls on us to engage with food in new imaginative ways. And, in the words of Maxine Greene, we recognize that the imagination is what allows us to "look beyond the boundary where the backyard ends or the road narrows, diminishing out of sight."[28] With the ecological, political, social, and other crises we currently face, we need to push these boundaries now, more than ever.

Notes

1. The Civic Paths Editorial Team consists of Do Own (Donna) Kim, Paulina Lanz, Sangita Shresthova, Isabel Delano, Molly Frizzell, Amanda Lee, Khaliah Reed, Becky Pham, Steve Proudfoot, Javier Rivera, and Essence Lynn Wilson. ↩

2. Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (New York: NYU Press, 2020). ↩

3. Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (London: Routledge, 2005), 94. ↩

4. Isabel Delano, Mehitabel Glenhaber, Do Own (Donna) Kim, Paulina Lanz, Ioana Mischie, Tyler Quick, Khaliah Peterson-Reed, et al., "Flying Cars and Bigots: Projecting Post-COVID-19 Worlds through the Atlas of the Civic Imagination as Refuge for Hope," *Continuum* 36, no. 2 (2022): 169–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2021.2003303 < https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2021.2003303> . ↩

5. Stephen Duncombe, "Introduction: Open Utopia," *OpenUtopia* (blog), 2012, https://theopenutopia.org/full-text/introduction-open-utopia/ < https://theopenutopia.org/full-text/introduction-open-utopia/> . ↩

6. Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 197. ↩

7. Anne Pendleton-Jullian and John Seely Brown, *Pragmatic Imagination: Single from Design Unbound* (San Jose: Blurb, 2016). ↩

8. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014). ↩

9. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013). ↩

10. Carole Counihan, “Memories, Meals, and Shame in Florence, Italy,” in *Food in Memory and Imagination: Space, Place and, Taste*, ed. Beth Forrest and Greg de St Maurice (Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 149–61.

11. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “Diana Kennedy, Rick Bayless and the Imagination of ‘Authentic’ Mexican Food,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 97, no. 4 (April 20, 2020): 567–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2020.1699330 < https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2020.1699330> .

12. Schuwerk and Parody, “Food, Popular Culture, and the Covid-19 Pandemic Special Issue.”

13. Tara J. Schuwerk and Jessica M. Parody. “Food, Popular Culture, and the Covid-19 Pandemic Special Issue.” *Popular Culture Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2022): 4–7.

14. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, “Why Food? Why Culture? Why Now? Introduction to the Third Edition,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

15. Lisa Pine, “Food Memory and Food Imagination at Auschwitz,” in *Food in Memory and Imagination: Space, Place and, Taste*, ed. Beth Forrest and Greg de St. Maurice (Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 109–22.

16. Raymond Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 91–100.

17. Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed John Storey, 4th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006), 514.

18. Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 518.

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Author Information

Do Own (Donna) Kim

Do Own (Donna) Kim is an Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois Chicago's Department of Communication. She studies everyday, playful digital cultures and mediated social interactions. Her work examines boundary-crossing new media practices, such as around games, virtual influencers, and Korean digital feminism, with a focus on hybrid contexts, norms, and categories, and the notion of being human/artificial. Her work can be found in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*. Donna received her PhD in Communication from the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and is a Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies fellow alum.

View all of Do Own (Donna) Kim's articles.

Sangita Shresthova

Sangita Shresthova is the Director of Research and Programs and Co-PI of the Civic Imagination Project based at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, CA. She is a writer, researcher, scholar, speaker, and practitioner with expertise in mixed-methods research, media literacies, media and parenting, popular culture, civic imagination, and globalization. Her recent publications include three co-authored books: *Practicing Futures: The Civic Imagination Action Handbook*, *Transformative Media Pedagogies*, and *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*. Sangita is one of the creators of the Digital Civics Toolkit, a collection of resources for educators and teachers to support youth learning. Her creative work has also been presented in venues around the world including the Pasadena Dance Festival, Schaubuehne (Berlin), the Other Festival (Chennai), the EBS International Documentary Festival (Seoul), and the American Dance Festival (Durham, NC). She is also a faculty member at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change in Austria.

View all of Sangita Shresthova's articles.

Paulina Lanz

Paulina is a PhD candidate at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and holds a certificate in Digital Media and Culture from the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Rooted in material cultural studies, Paulina addresses absence as a source of memory and nostalgia as storytelling and communication. By the means of visual and audible aesthetics, her research projects and pedagogies expand on sensorial fields to foster an interdisciplinary commitment in multimodal approaches to public scholarship.

View all of Paulina Lanz's articles.

Article details

Do Own (Donna) Kim, Sangita Shresthova, and Paulina Lanz, "Introduction – Feeding the Civic Imagination," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.9

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

“A Pinch of Imagination”

by Paulina Lanz and Sulafa Zidani | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT There is a rise in events connecting people to food, the sources of food, and the materiality of food––including all its affective and sensorial qualities. We have found that this not only translates into food politics but into a wide array of power dynamics surrounding food that connect our past to our imagined/desired futures, especially as we engage with conversations that become nodes that facilitate connections across cultures. The connection lies beyond the ingredients but in the affective agency within them and their relationship to each other. We focus on how we connect through the ingredients, how we measure them, and how they exist in relation to one another, as ingredients strengthen the affective connection with food materiality, as we feel the textures and tastes in order to know if you put the right quantity. Our proposal is a provocation of how transnational creative practices are produced and translated through a cocreated recipe whereby talking through a common recipe (and how that recipe came to be) we disclose and imagine glocal similarities between Mexican food and Palestinian food.

KEYWORDS affect, civic imagination, food politics, materiality

A Frothy Prologue

Amid the stressful experiences of attending graduate school during the pandemic, the two of us connected over our appreciation of frothed milky drinks. The airiness, malleability, and visually soothing qualities of the frothed milk allowed us to find a peaceful moment, creating a connection that added texture to an otherwise quotidian drink There are some senses that are more prone to prompting our imagination; taste, touch, and smell do just that. Creamy, bubbly, and aromatic, each of these naturally occurring foams adds a comforting

dimension of texture to drinks. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine period, deprived of each other's in-person company, we began sending photos sharing our homemade frothy drinks: iced cappuccino, latte, hot cocoa . . . Those photos were reminders to let go of the anxiety we both felt due to the pandemic and graduate school and be in the moment. They said "I know what you are going through. I am here." They were a way for us to be together in our rage and comfort and push beyond them.[1] As our drinks got more creative (matcha latte, golden milk . . .), their symbolism grew. The photos we shared became gestures of care and comfort that opened a conversation about food, community, memory, and imagination. This piece is a recipe of care, where we build on the traditions of the civic imagination by making solidarity the basis on which we connect through shared interests and embrace different perspectives and experiences.[2] First, we will provide some background on our relationship and interest in food. We will then have a dialogue reflecting on the cultural connections between Mexican and Palestinian cuisine. Next, we will present our imagined cocreated recipe. We allow ourselves to whip up a mode of conversation through the cultural significance and the story behind food and what it allows us to imagine together, direct, and personal, and informed by collective and cultural understanding of the systems of meaning, memory, and identity behind the meals that shape us.

As we build on the past, and on our personal stories and upbringings, we activate the imagination by bringing together different perspectives of our own relationship to food. There are particular qualities of edible memories that can be expanded upon, especially when it comes to the motivating connection between food and personal memories. However, we found particular interest in the possibilities of connection in evoked imagination "driven by the combined promise of unfamiliarity and a rich narrative," when connections to the past come from unfamiliar taste.[3] By doing so, we shed light on cultural and transnational connections to reclaim the possibility of imagining collectively. The recognition of our individual voices reinforces the communal interconnectedness we shaped

through froth, allowing this vibrant sensory experience to guide us in conceiving a cocreation through food. Stephen Duncombe's work on *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* brings about the concept of an ethical spectacle that happens through co-created collective participation to contribute to the materialization of transformative action through interventions.[4]

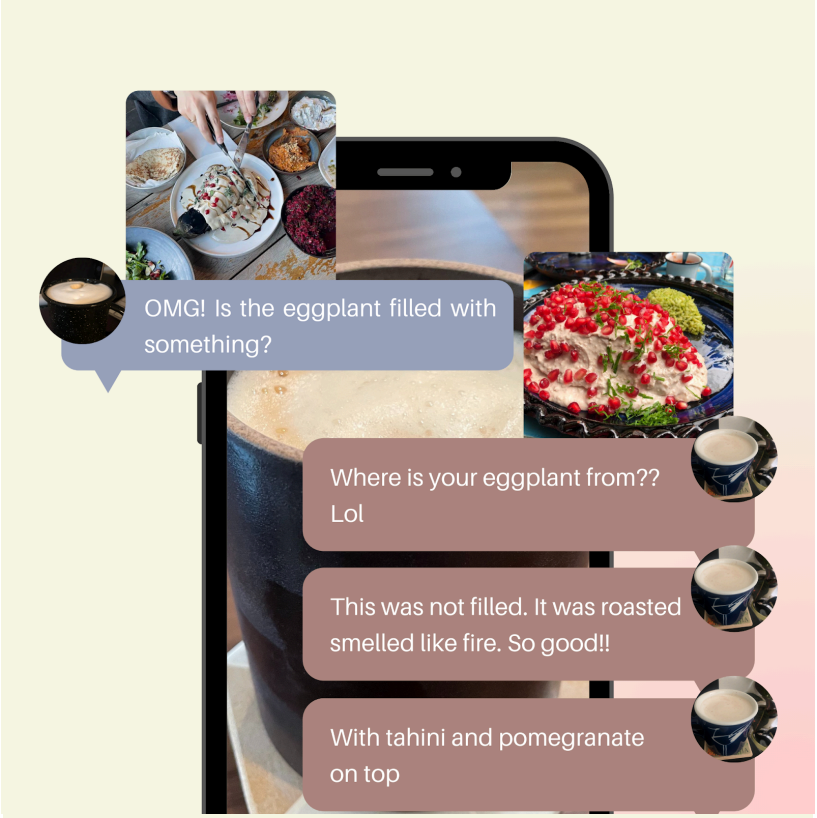
This is our own intervention, one rooted in remembrance and nostalgia. However, instead of these affective registers drifting us away from dreams halted from possibility, we use our imagination to create together, to break away from the constraints of measurements, of a structure-based cuisine—because the civic imagination prompts the individual to foster the collective, to imagine oneself as a civic actor who can make a difference is a key part of civic imagination. But, civic imagination also requires engaging with others; we do so through this conversation, by appreciating and empathizing with the views of others. Our collaboration is an extension of the communities we belong to, locally and transnationally. It is also an invitation to all who choose to join in.

The civic imagination being a social, rather than individual, process that emerges from a shared vision, helps us express our desires for radical change that we feel can happen through instances of food––particularly that shared across generations. We take inspiration from historian Robin D.G. Kelley in *Freedom Dreams*, for food–like poetry–has the possibility of transporting us to a different place, where we are capable of imagining something new, new spaces for collective action that come together through the materiality of food.[5] This conversation-through-recipes is in itself a case study of transnational popular culture that engages the civic imagination whereas recipes as in themselves vehicles to pass along shared wisdom, as inspired by Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova.[6] This is also an invitation to imagine alongside us, to daydream about meals that bring home closer, regardless of geopolitical location.

Figures 1 & 2. A selection of pandemic froth exchange between Lanz and Zidani

Is The Eggplant Filled With Something?

Our exchange of frothed milk photos opened up conversations about our shared interest in food: where it comes from, how we relate to it, and how we relate through it to each other—Zidani's foodie recommendations in Los Angeles were life-changing to Lanz, especially tacos. Every meal encounter became a moment of connection, especially as similarities arose between Middle Eastern and Latin American cuisine. Perhaps it was our global roots finding their way to each other, forging solidarities *through* an active enactment of our different ethnic origins.



Figures 3 & 4. Visual representations of a conversation that took place between the authors at some point during the 2020–2022 time vortex.

In our conversations about food, we found connections and resonance across cultures: from shawarma and tacos al pastor to traditional desserts made with dough, nuts, dried fruit, and sugar syrup in Palestine.

Figure 5. Zidani’s family tasting a roasted eggplant with tahini, January 2022.

Figure 6. Lanz inaugurating Chile en Nogada season in early June 2021.

Dough and nutty delights, seeds and honey make their way into bars in traditional Mexican sweets, where nuts, raisins, and peanuts share the stage with chocolate, sweet and unsweetened. From colonial times, fruits such as quince, guava, lemon, and strawberry were also used to prepare *ate moreliano*, which, paired with aged cheese, makes an absolute delight. Water, sugar, and lime in Palestinian sweets equate to water, piloncillo, and lime in Mexico when old and stale resources are renewed by being submerged in boiling liquid elixir. There are other sources of cultural fusions, such as tacos árabes, Turkish coffee, and cactus fruit as a national symbol. Migration plays an important role in these culinary cultural exchanges; Iraqi families fled to Mexico from the Middle East in the early twentieth century due to the British invasion. They found similarities between their kebabs

and Mexican tacos and pinched their imagination as a means of survival by creating tacos árabes in the city of Puebla: pork döner kebab, Mexican labneh, and chipotle-based sauce. However, since migration is rarely unidirectional, a Palestinian national symbol, the *Sabr* (or cactus pear), grown all over the Middle East and also used as a natural border between houses and villages, are lineages that originated in Mexico.[7] This visual omnipresence in the Middle East, with a deep connection to the Palestinian imagery, was imported from Mexico by European traders as a scurvy prevention method. These fusions help better understand the connections in cultural practices, where ingredients and food display both the interpreted and the imagined influences and shared emotions towards enacting change.

Figure 7. Knafeh that Zidani enjoyed with her cousin at Qashash Sweets in Akka, December 2021.

Figure 8. Freshly made amaranth bar that Lanz got from the market in Mexico City, December 2021.

Cultural Connections

Pick an item from the fridge.

Every kitchen holds essential ingredients that its cooks cannot go without. The mundane basics that you will always find in Zidani's grandma, Mariam (Umm Saeed) Sindawi's house are foundations for the history and identity of Palestinian cuisine.[8] In each of our refrigerators, fresh vegetables and fruit are a majority of the basics. However, the type of vegetable and its preparation process varies widely between Palestinian and Mexican cuisines. The nuanced difference between parsley and cilantro plays an important role when it comes to transforming minced tomato, onion, and lemon juice into a tabbouli/pico de gallo salad. This labor of transformation as an act of love also plays a role when making taboon bread and flour tortillas by hand, where a pinch of flour or a drizzle of water will make a difference between a puffed dough treat and a soggy ball of wheat. As to how to better enjoy this freshly baked bread? How about with a rustic handmade traditional dish of silky and coarsely mashed ingredients with lime juice, topped with seasonings and salt? Lanz's mind went to her favorite taco-stand guacamole recipe, while Zidani visited her grandmother's (not-so-secret) recipe of homemade hummus bi tahini, indulged with a freshly baked mouthful of flour delight.

These are the memories we drew on when we imagined our co-created recipe. A dish that brings our own everyday ingredients together at the center of the table––or on peripheral ones, that cocreate how we engage with each other while navigating this space that prompts the imagination. The recipe and countertop become radical spaces for exchange, both in political commitments and individual memories; it becomes a material framework for new ways of recipe making and sharing. As you look through the list of ingredients, we invite you to use your imagination and memory of flavors and textures to discern what quantities need to be.

Measurements

How do you know how much water to add to rice? Or how much lemon juice to add to tahini? A recipe teaches us to follow instructions carefully to avoid ruining a dish. Zidani often gets recipes from her grandmother over the phone, where Teyta Umm Sa'eed carefully explains what the ratio of onion to coriander to parsley should be to make the perfect falafel, and how the "masa" should feel somewhere between crumbly and sticky to the touch to know that it is not too soggy. Other directions are passed down in written form, as Lanz noticed in a *Good Housekeeping Illustrated Cookbook* that has been passed down through three generations.

5½ cups batter
Rectangular: 3 cups
Micro: 6 min. Low; 4½ min. High
Stand 10 min. uncovered

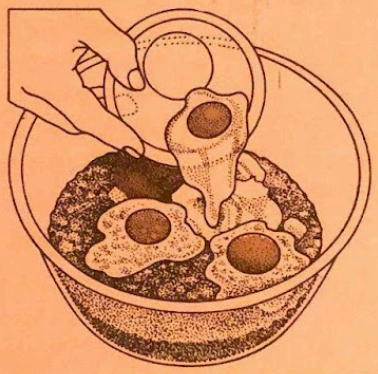
Chocolate Cupcakes

Color index page 93

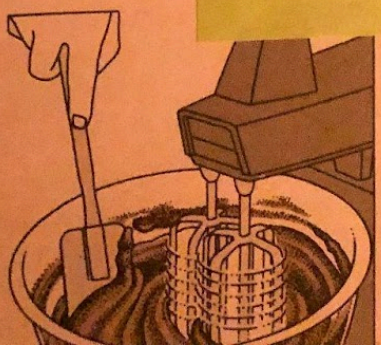
Begin early in day

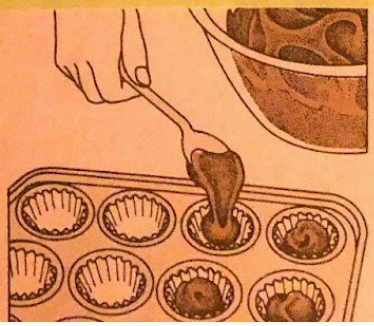
24 cupcakes

2 cups cake flour
1 ¾ cups sugar
¾ cup cocoa
1¼ cups milk
¾ cup shortening
3 eggs
1¼ teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
½ teaspoon double-acting baking powder
Coffee Cream-Cheese Frosting (page 400)



1 Preheat ov
Place liners
3-inch muffin
grease and flo





ready for her party.

The scientification of measurements in the form of exact prescribed quantities in recipes entered the kitchen as part of a process of modernizing food cultures, a process that was specifically tied to the idea of civility.[9] In our own cocreated recipe, we steer away from exact measurements and return to our parents' and grandparents' descriptive measurements. In this way, we break the push for manufactured specificity and ideas of purity in measurements and instead invite you to engage with past experience, textures, mouthfeel, and your own taste to determine what measurement is right.

This invitation is founded in the acknowledgment that eating[10] and cooking[11] are both political acts where power is enacted through taste, measurement, and, in our case, through making food together. We want to invite you to imagine alternatives—those that can later prompt conversations of solidarity and change, and add to the sharing of energies and emotions as they relate to food in order to make social change sensorially and affectively tangible. This aligns with the central aim of this special issue, "Feeding the Civic Imagination," which explores how engaging with food can spark alternative possibilities of civic participation and drive positive social transformations.[12] We want to understand how collective energies and shared emotions in relation to food pave the way for tangible social change. We invite perspectives and experiences, to materialize imaginative dimensions through an ingredient-based practice, measuring ingredients in relation to each other and to the number of people eating. In the recipe, you will notice that we give options rather than measurements, and descriptions about texture and taste to let you know how to test the food. We thought this practice would be especially apt in this special section because it asks readers (and cooks) to activate the imagination about the past times they have tried this food and connect it to their desired taste for the recipe's outcome.

Ingredients

Vegetables to Roast

Pick your vegetables to roast either in the oven (425°F) or on a BBQ for an extra smoky taste.

Eggplant	*For this dish, get a large eggplant (or more, depending on how many people are eating with you). It may be an Italian eggplant or any other type, as all eggplants are delicious. Zidani has made baba ganoush and mutabbal from Chinese eggplants and globe eggplants and it was always delicious.*
Poblano Pepper	*You can create this dish with any size of pepper. We do recommend that you aim for a medium-large poblano pepper, as you will need to stuff it and wrap it around itself– burrito style. You will need to roast the pepper, sweat it in a plastic bag, and peel it right after. Make sure to open a window; you never know if your pepper will be extra spicy and you will feel the burn through the fumes (based on Lanz's experience 9.5 out of 10 times roasting peppers). We highly recommend making more than just one pepper.*
Cactus (Nopales)	*We thought to introduce nopales to our dish because Palestinian and Mexican cultures both seem to hold cactus to a special status. Zidani remembers summers marked by cactus fruit being gifted to her family, and Lanz remembers summer afternoons with large bowls of green cactus fruit (tuna) peeled and ready to eat on the kitchen table. Cactus is the perfect side(kick) to every dish: boiled with lentil soup, grilled with cheese, steamed with street tacos, or chopped in a pico de gallo-style salad.*

Stuffing Options for Pepper

Start with the roast-sweat-peel technique on the poblano peppers while leaving the stem intact. Cut down on your firm and bright poblano and carve out the seeds and ribs of the pepper. You can stuff the peppers with candied (cooked apple, pear, tomato, peach, raisins, almonds, and plantain) 50/50 grounded beef & pork or choose to make the dish entirely vegetarian by stuffing it with one of the following:

Option 1: Cheese	*Lanz recommends going with "quesillo" or Oaxacan cheese. This variety of string cheese melts easily and makes the prepping process even more entertaining.*
Option 2: Veggie and fruit stuffing	*You can cook the traditional stuffing for the poblano without adding the ground meat. For consistency, you can add breadcrumbs or squares of queso fresco (panela).*

Sauce

Choose one or both sauces below. If you are making the tahini sauce, then you can pour it over the vegetables. Otherwise, make the nogada sauce on the side (or both sauces on the side).

Tahini ***Sauce:*** *TahiniLemon SaltWater*	*The amount of tahini depends on how many vegetables you're making. If you're making one of each, then start with ¼ cup of tahini. Add the lemon first (start with a tablespoon). Lemon thickens the tahini, so you'll want to follow with water, adding it gradually until you reach your desired texture. The resulting sauce needs to be creamy and liquid enough to pour over the vegetables. Add some salt, and taste it to see if any ingredients are missing.*
Nogada (walnut) ***Sauce:*** *WalnutsAlmondsCrème fraîcheQueso fresco*	*You can never have enough nogada. To avoid almonds overpowering the taste of your walnuts, make sure you have a 1:8 ratio of almonds to walnuts; almonds should be around a handful. While you ´re puréeing the nuts, start adding the crème fraîche and the crumbled queso fresco in equivalent amounts. Once you reach the desired taste, thin it with water until it is spreadable enough; add salt as needed—perhaps a pinch or two. Coat or top your stuffed poblano with nogada sauce or serve it on the side.*

Garnish

Garnish your dish with either parsley, coriander, or pomegranate.

Setting the Table

To us, sharing a meal represents a lot more than the physical act of going through the various treats before us. Eating together is one of many acts that take place in

the meal-sharing repertoire. It starts by choosing the recipe and selecting the ingredients. Every part evokes an emotional connection to those who will share the meal. As food becomes a link between absence and acts of love, sharing a meal goes beyond the culinary tradition, as it becomes a place to create bonds and dialogue between both loved ones and strangers, setting cultural differences out on the table to be discussed. It lies in the small symbolic actions like breaking an awkward silence with "*ahlan wasahlan*," or the perpetual avoidance of the top tortilla of the bunch, or even the metaphysical rational that meets another's superstitions when passing the salt in another's hand.

Figure 10. A quintessential Palestinian table with a selection of appetizers and salads from the Bread and Fish restaurant, Akka, 2021.

Figure 11. A visual representation of the avoided top tortilla, regardless of its origin. Photo taken at Mercado, Oaxaca, November 20, 2019.

In these subtle moments, communal act of eating is reflected in the small yet symbolically significant actions. The instruments we use to consume our meals take on greater meaning. For example, chopsticks designed for bite-sized morsels allow food to be grasped and conversation to flow. Hands scooping up shared dishes create intimacy through touch. In Barthes' view, neither utensil is merely functional, but rather they shape the experience and essence of the meal.[13] The food, the dishware, and the diners all come together in a synchronized movement that merges substance and symbol.

As we break the bread, the meal connects us in a time to be, to reconcile past and present, where heritage and imagination coexist through taste, scent, and touch.

Every affective register of the meal adds to the traces that connect the food-sharers, to pave the way for the future and as a pin-holder to find their way back as many times as needed. As people keep reminding others that they didn't eat enough, only to continuously add to their plate, Zidani's dinners are followed by a fight over who will do the dishes (people want to help and often whoever is hosting refuses the help). Lanz's have table talks that will last for hours, opening up space for conversation, coffee, cake, or an improvised dessert; eventually, guests will get hungry, and another meal will be shared.

Dessert

For dessert, we recommend that you find fresh fruit that is in season and cut it with your guests present rather than preparing it in advance. Get a large round tray and serve as you cut. You can squeeze some lime and sprinkle some tajin if you want to add a sweet acidity and spiciness to your fruit. You can talk about where this fruit was grown and where it is native to.

Figure 12. The epitome of acts of love in the shape of a fruit tray created by Zidani's grandmother.

Usually, after some digestion time, Zidani's family brings out a large tray with whatever fruit is in season. In the summer, it will be her father cutting up watermelon in his signature method where he peels it before chopping it into long rectangles, or her aunt will bring over fresh cactus fruit. In winter, the watermelon ceremony is replaced with a large pomelo ceremony, or with grandma peeling oranges and talking about their health benefits. Dessert is just as much part of the connection to family, land, and the seasons as the main meal. It is a family bonding activity focused on sharing love and nourishing each other. It is also a communal learning activity about our geographies, seasons, and the natural medicinal benefits of our foods.

Figure 13. Liquid dessert (a.k.a. Mexican hot chocolate made with cocoa and warm water) in a traditional clay gourd cup (*jícara de guaje*) paired with a vanilla concha, Puerto Escondido, June

Chocolate is well known for its connection to healing. This is where we can draw another instance of bonding through the land with sweet bread and xocolatl—Mexican hot chocolate. In Mexico, the sweet bread tradition dates back to the pre-Hispanic period, when corn-based tortillas—or *cocolli-* were used as offerings to the Aztec gods. These recipes changed through time into a wide variety of sweet bread that comes from an indigenous cultural fusion paired with colonial influences in the region. Xocolatl, on the other hand, is manually frothed in warm water, so all the senses can mindfully soak in the ritual of xocolatl—resembling the powerful Mayan and Aztec xocolatl rituals where chocolate was used to connect to the spirit world through the open heart. The warmth of the sweet bread and the hot chocolate are also affective registers of nourishment and love.

Epilogue: Coffee and Tea

After dessert, coffee, and tea are offered to the guests as a kind gesture that it is time to wrap up the fun and leave soon. These caffeinated beverages keep loved ones awake as they make their way back to their homes, lest the food makes them sleepy. Such acts of community care in preparing food, welcoming people, and even texting each other photos of frothy milk drinks serve as a foundation for us to cocreate our recipe.

To get to our recipe, we told each other stories that revealed not just our favorite family and cultural traditions, but also what is important for us to carry forward to the world. Exchanging stories about the experiences, traditions, and recipe elements that are most important to us opened up room for us to imagine a recipe that brings together the elements that are most meaningful to us. Together, we recounted how measurements and textures were communicated to us by our elders, the smells and touches that livened up the atmosphere, and the gestures

and actions that conveyed mutual care. When it comes to the question "What can a recipe do?," as a practice in civic imagination, being able to incorporate each of our worlds in the recipe gave us a quotidian taste of possible futures. It invites our reader to imagine alongside us, prompting their individual imagination towards a collective way of thinking and *doing* civic imagination through the ingredients we select and the memories these recipes foster. This possibility drove us to write the recipe with flexibility so that others can iterate on it, making their own selections and inserting their own touch.

A Mexican and a Palestinian coming together to create today is a recognition that our histories and our future are inextricably linked. Our frothy drinks, roasted vegetables, and shared recipes constitute an opening space for the world of engagement and mutual care that we desire. In her book, *A Place at the Nayarit*, Mexican American historian Natalia Molina writes about her grandmother's restaurant in order to demonstrate how Mexican women's labor carves out spaces for Latinx immigrants in Los Angeles to connect with one another through tastes of where they come from and where they are.[14] The restaurant, the Nayarit, thus became a place where conversations about food could act as a precursor for solidarity, safety, and community care in a racist and anti-immigrant environment. We hope that, in the absence of physical proximity, this recipe can form such a space for people to meet at the point where their tastes connect, and their politics intersect.

Moreover, we had both witnessed examples of Mexican, Palestinian, and other food appropriations that disconnect them from their context and contribute to the erasure of the culture instead of connecting to it and benefiting the people who created it. Foregrounding the practices and historical significance is another act of civic engagement and imagining otherwise. Imagination can pass along these memories and cultural expressions, despite the unavoidable transcultural influences[15] and a hybridity of culture.[16] Therefore, rather than creating a fusion recipe born through cultural appropriation, we use our conversations to suggest a

different form of consumption and culture-mixing that is founded on cocreation, care, history, and continuity.

Pour yourself a frothy drink.

Get cooking.

Join in imagination.

Notes

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Author Information

Paulina Lanz

Paulina is a PhD candidate at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and holds a certificate in Digital Media and Culture from the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Rooted in material cultural studies, Paulina addresses absence as a source of memory and nostalgia as storytelling and communication. By the means of visual and audible aesthetics, her research projects and pedagogies expand on sensorial fields to foster an interdisciplinary commitment in multimodal approaches to public scholarship.

View all of Paulina Lanz's articles.

Sulafa Zidani

Sulafa Zidani is a writer, speaker, and educator at Northwestern University, where she is an Assistant Professor in Communication Studies. As a critical global internet studies scholar, she researches civic engagement and online creative practices across languages. Her work has been informed by her proficiency in Mandarin, English,

Arabic, Hebrew, and French. She is currently working on her first book project called *All Your Meme Are Belong To Us: Internet Cultures in the Global South* about how meme creators navigate transnational politics on the multilingual internet. Her research has appeared in venues such as *Social Media + Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Asian Communication Research*. She is a co-editor of the forthcoming anthology *The Intersectional Internet II: Power, Politics and Resistance Online*.

View all of Sulafa Zidani's articles.

Article details

Paulina Lanz & Sulafa Zidani, ""A Pinch of Imagination"," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.10

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

From Housewives to Homemakers: Civic Engagement, Imagination, and Déjà Vu in Taiwan

by Kris Chi | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT In a democratic country like Taiwan, civic participation generally takes place everywhere and every day in various forms, such as petitioning, community building, and protesting, and it is too mundane to be noted. Not until the moment of crisis could the energy it has harbored be seen. COVID-19 undoubtedly is a challenge for all humans in the world. Misfortune as it was, this state of exception presented people with resilience and creativity to assist one another. Starting from an incident of "veg boxes" during the pandemic, this article tries to connect the optimistic view toward social changes with its possible model. By linking Homemakers United Foundation, a local organization closely related to food and environmental issues, and its development to the history of nation-building, this article also discusses what kind of civic imagination has been deployed and its connection with history.

KEYWORDS Cold War, Taiwan, civic imagination, housewife, social movements

When the first wave of COVID-19 finally hit Taiwan in May 2021, going to markets to buy one's food became an action triggering public anxiety. With confirmed cases rising, all forms of markets were stigmatized, and those insisting on going to markets, usually the elder or family caretakers, were regarded as infection control breaches. To stop those "ignorant old people" from risking their lives buying food, "veg boxes" went viral overnight. Orders flocked to any platforms with this service. Buying one's vegetables online became a trendy gesture of responsible citizens engaged in preventing the virus from spreading. These little

boxes carried people's optimistic imagination that everyone could contribute to modeling a better future even when facing this tough and unknown challenge. G0v, a grassroots civic community that was actively involved in the Sunflower Student Movement, also accelerated the visibility of this veg box issue by starting a collaborative writing page targeting the information related to buying veg boxes and even providing a collection of recipes to teach kitchen novices how to cook.

This series of smooth organization—from searching for the source of veg boxes to publicizing the information with the cowriting page to teaching each other how to deal with the ingredients they get from random boxes—did not come out of thin air. Instead, it greatly benefited from the history of how people have been organized and are organizing themselves in Taiwan. The history constructed a paradigm imprinted on people's minds and further influenced how people imagined their roles regarding civic participation. Twenty years ago, the Homemakers Union Consumers Coop figured out a way called "a basket of vegetables," i.e., a veg box, to combine their support to the practitioners of eco-friendly agriculture with the hope for every member to enjoy vegetables with less nitrate. They started to work with farmers, to study more effective ways of cultivating organic food, and to build a channel to share the idea of ethical eating and creative recipes with their members. Tracing the symbol of veg boxes, this short piece for Feeding the Civic Imagination Forum revisits the history of this thread that features the role of housewives and their imagination to offer a different story of civic participation in Taiwan.

Homemakers United Foundation and Taiwanese Housewives

Before the lifting of martial law, New Environment Magazine, an environmental organization formed primarily by university professors and scholars, was established in 1985 as a response to the burgeoning environmental challenges,

emerging as a trailblazer in the environmental movement in Taiwan. Hsu Shen-shu, the wife of a founding member of New Environment Magazine, played a central role in managing the group's administrative tasks. From a housewife's perspective, Hsu required more practical action than writing articles to change this worsening world, so she gathered volunteers who were also middle-class housewives to start the New Environment Homemakers League (Sin Huanjing Jhufu Lianmeng). Through her imagination, Hsu's move made the wives, who were usually excluded from the public sphere in those days, potential participants in social movements.[1] Moreover, to differentiate this league from another mainstream feminist activist group at the time, whose members mainly were female scholars and elites urging women to "leave the kitchen and march to the Office of the President,"[2] Hsu and her fellows chose to "stay in the kitchen," for the kitchen was the core of their life and identity. Identifying themselves as "ordinary mothers," these women hoped to make room for more women like themselves to participate in social issues from everyday practice and living habits. For example, their debut, also one of the most well-known actions, targeted food —a group of women dressed up and stood in front of McDonald's to protest against the overpriced hamburgers and the harm of junk food in 1986, when the chain just had its first branch in Taiwan. In 1989, the New Environment Homemakers League was registered under the Homemakers United Foundation (HUF thereafter). An organization under the name of housewives was then born.[3]

At the early stage, HUF, according to its claim, took care of issues mothers would typically be concerned about— environment, education, female empowerment, and green consumption.[4] It was generally agreed that HUF did an extraordinary job when it came to issues related to environmental protection, via which they worked actively with both governmental and non-government sectors.[5] HUF's interest in green topics later fostered a co-buying group—Homemakers Union Consumers Co-op (HUCC). HUCC, which focuses on food—the most common symbol of everyday mundanity—to bridge individuals and society, is a cooperative chiefly promoting healthy eating, environmentally friendly consumption, and the

cooperative economy. Now, it has eighty thousand members all around Taiwan, which means at least the same number of households complete their food consumption through the network built by the coop because its target audience connects their social identity with family, such as mothers and caretakers. Most Taiwanese cannot tell the difference between HUF and HUCC or detail what they are doing, but the title “Homemaker Union” will naturally evoke their engagement in environmental issues.

The connection between HUF and HUCC, as described by Hsiu-chuan Cheng, the current chairperson of HUF, can be likened to that of a mother and her child, with each entity sharing and dividing labor: the former advocates environmental policies, and the latter works on food-related issues and financially supports the former.[6] Their relationship suggests a linear logic of the potential of citizenship based on food. HUCC can be said to be the kitchen of HUF. As Cheng said, HUCC’s members change the world through everyday practice. Kitchens, a seemingly pure domestic space that women can fully control, are turned into a public sphere when the controllers problematize food and eating issues. By training and grouping women capable of “voting with their forks,”[7] from their food preparation to consumption, this kitchen, where one thinks about how to feed a family, can help to turn housewives into “qualified citizens”[8] who can participate in changing the food system to make human life more sustainable and who can further educate their families to be as qualified as their mothers.

Housewifized Citizenship[9]

This seemingly perfect citizen cultivation plan of HUCC is very similar to the content behind the zeitgeist pervading in the 1950s, the Cold War era. “Educating a mother is equal to educating a family” was a slogan to promote *the Plan to Help the Needy in Taiwan*, a governmental project to eliminate poverty in a society undergoing economic reconstruction after Japanese colonial rule.[10] According to

the agreement of the China Aid Act of 1948, the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction invited home economics experts from the US to teach mothers to support a family more scientifically so as not to fall into the poverty circle and give the communist party chances to win the village people in the Cold War context.[11] This part of US aid brought the idea of management into families, popularizing flour consumption and partly changing people's eating habits through women.[12] Women at the time not only kept the kitchens but also were the gatekeepers of a newly established sovereignty by utilizing the limited resources they could gain. From saving the country with the family in the 1950s to governing the country with family education, women had always been situated at the post to connect the country and the family, making the two a continuum.[13] Female homemakers had never been absent from the process of nation-building; they were active "in-house" participants even before the term civic participation emerged. However, when this relatively established country walked on its path to a modern and democratic nation-state, ordinary women became "unqualified" citizens who did not participate in the public sphere because the idea of family was overturned, being simplified as the kitchen that women needed to leave. If women refused to leave the kitchens, they would become isolated housewives and end up as miserable decorations of a happy family.[14]

HUF's appearance overturned the dichotomy between the private and public spheres by envisioning a different kind of housewife who can make up for the deficiency of the "big nation" (da jia) through the daily life practice in one's own "small family" (xiao jia). HUF attempted to prove that if women could take care of their homes, they could take care of the state.[15] Throughout these years, HUF has made marvelous progress in advocating green topics, including the scheme of sorting recyclable materials and collecting food waste, which hugely influences the mode of life in Taiwan.[16] HUF's strategy of making housewives homemakers and further "life makers" (shenghuo zhe) succeeds in bringing another possible form of civic participation into Taiwanese society. More and more women proudly emphasize their identity as mothers while participating in scaled-up negotiations

and meetings with government units at various levels and collaborating with international organizations. These mothers are more than ordinary housewives; they are as resourceful and influential as those feminist elites aiming at the office of the president.

Undoubtedly, HUF's success has positioned it as a model of civic and, subsequently, political engagement, providing people with a fresh perspective on envisioning or redefining their involvement in reshaping society. With HUF's case, I intend to show how the power of civic imagination can upend the image of the kitchen deployed by the HUF's counterpart in the mainstream feminist movement. Regarding strategy, food as an advocacy target effectively arouses people's attention, making the everyday political. Besides the accessibility, food's translatability makes it a seemingly handy tool to deal with the problems people face in life.[17] Some ordinary women could translate food into a way to live as a housewife while granting themselves political agency. However, because of food's relationship to human consumption, people must be more creative or food will be appropriated by capitalism. As Seungsook Moon reminded through her study on a feminist food cooperative in South Korea, if the people's motivation for joining a coop is out of personal interests, such as the pursuit of families' health or safe food,[18] the underpinning ideals of changing the food system or creating a clean and poison-free environment would be concealed by this sort of consumer movement.[19] When consumption goes first, the focus of the whole movement would gradually move to marketing and branding rather than advocating sustainable diets or lifestyles to draw people's attention to the food system, the origin of food crisis nowadays.[20] This way, the complexity of the homemaker-producer relationship, the reasons for active participants to be engaged in ethical food, and even the possible exploitation will be neglected.

At the core of HUF's origins, the image of middle-class housewives has consistently been a subject of criticism, especially after the popularization of HUCC, whose food and ingredients are relatively higher in price.[21] Hence, these

“housewives” successfully demonstrate a daring way to imagine what a housewife can do by trying to break a traditionally acknowledged public-private dichotomy where food belongs to the privatized sphere of personal choice and commercial activities, and people with political agency reside only outside the kitchen. Whether direct or indirect, HUF’s appearance has created some impact, especially on how to unite people with similar beliefs and carry out civic engagement.

From the example of food as an agent of civic imagination in Taiwan, the slogan “educating a mother is equal to educating a family” could still be heard faintly. The veg box in its past and present life embodies the historical materiality of this kind of imagination, whose agency comes from different historical contexts, inter-referencing one another. Detached from or overlapped with the original meanings, the civic imagination endorsed with new importance by the contemporaries in response to certain urgency will start another phase of civic participation or even for entirely novel possibilities to take root.

Notes

1. Yu-ci Chen , “Rensheng Jingsiang: Sheng jhih yong–Fangtan Faci Ren Hsu Shen Shu Wang Bao Zi — ” {Reflection of Life: Cocoon of life–Interviewing the pioneers, Hsu Shen-shu and Wang Bao Zi}, last modified March 1, 2012, https://www.huf.org.tw/essay/content/768. ↩

2. When addressing the practice of gender equality, the Awakening Foundation once titled the forum “Taiwanese women leave the kitchens for the Office of the President” (Taiwan Nyuren Zouchu Chufang, Maisiang Zongtongfu). They claimed that women should be emancipated from the kitchen to concern themselves with and participate in changing society. They were strongly against the female workforce going underground, being privatized in the name of mothers and caretakers, who according to them led such an isolated life that they were stopped from having a full citizenship, for they could not even participate in the most basic form of civic participation, i.e., election. Yu-hsiu, Liu et al., *Nyusing Guojia Jhaogugongzuo • • (Females, States, the Care Work)* (Taipei: Fembooks Publishing House, 1986). ↩

3. Though the English title of HUF uses “homemakers,” the Mandarin title *Jhufu* is close to “housewives” or “the mistress of a family.” In their own writings, they often identify

themselves with the role of mothers, so *jhufu* would be more frequently associated with "housewives" than "homemakers." ↩

4. In Chen Lei-Ti's analysis of almost thirty years of publications HUF has sent to their members, the concern of HUF can be generally divided into these four fields, among which the ratio of environment and consumption issues was about 55 percent of their primary work. Lei-Ti Chen , "Cong Nyu Li Dao Lyu Li: Jhufu Lianmeng De Huanbao Guanhuai (1987–2015)" 1987–2015 (From 'Female Power' to 'Green Power': Homemaker United Foundation's Environmental Concerns, 1987–2015), " (master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, 2016). ↩

5. Wan-li Ho, *Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2016). ↩

6. Wan-chun Chen, host, "EP41 - Zhufu Lianmeng Hao Zimei-Jijinhui Yu Hezuoshe" (HUF Sisters-the Foundation and the Cooperative), in *Yi Lan Cai Zhenxinhua* (A Basket of Vegetables and Sincere Words), podcast, January 17, 2022, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0VrgOcuubSCYsmi0Mn7tCt. ↩

7. Here, I refer to Michael Pollan's phrase "Vote with Your Fork," by which Pollan claims consumers can influence the food system through their choice of food. ↩

8. See Note < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/from-housewives-to-homemakers-civic-engagement-imagination-taiwan-chi/#fn-13256-2> 2. ↩

9. The term "housewifized" connects this article to Maria Mies's influential concept of "housewifization." In her book, Mies examines how women's roles have historically shifted, showing how women and nature became exploited resources to serve capitalist development and capital accumulation. Women were relegated from the "public" sphere to the "private" one, excluded from formal sector jobs. Their labor became classified as informal and invisible. Even housewives became dehumanized—ideologically stripped of their role and status as citizens. By using "housewifized," this article taps into Mies's framework which critically analyzes the marginalization of women and the value of their labor over time to emphasize the dynamic process behind the term "housewife" instead of a fixed result. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986). ↩

10. Ping-Chun Hsiung, *Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 49. ↩

11. Chin-Wen Chen , "Taiwan Nongye Tuiguang Jiaoyu Jianshi "(A Brief History of Agricultural Extension in Taiwan), *Nongye Tuiguang Wenhui* (Agricultural Extension Anthology) 39 (1994): 5–9. ↩

12. Sheng-Fen Lin . "Taiwan Mianshi De Yangcheng: Meiyuanshidai shuru mianfen ye gaibian pengren wen hua " (The Consumption of Wheat Food in Taiwan: Flour Imported at US Aid Age Also Changing

Culinary Culture), last modified April 2, 2022, https://www.agriharvest.tw/archives/78088 < https://www.agriharvest.tw/archives/78088> .

13. Chi's thesis explains how home economics was instituted and occupied an essential position in the education system to instruct the construction of modern families after the war. Yushiuan Chi, "Studies of Domestic Labour and Family in the Making of Taiwan from 1996 to 2006" (master's thesis, National Central University, 2017).

14. See the above mentioned narrative of the feminist movement in the 1980s, which was largely influenced by second-wave feminism in the West.

15. Shu-Ning Lin , "Zhufu Lianmeng Huanjing Baohu Jijinhui Zhuyao Canyuzhe Zhi Zhongyao Shengming Jingyan Yanjiu Yi Taizhong Fen Shiwusuo Wei Li " (The Research of Major Participant's Significant Life Experiences, Taichung Branch, Homemakers' Union and Foundation) (master's thesis, National Taichung University of Education, 2013), 144.

16. Man-Li Chen , "Taiwan Chuyu Huishou Zhengce De Tuishou " (The Facilitators of the Policies of Recollecting Food Waste), December 10, 2015, https://www.hucc-coop.tw/monthly/PUBCATMONTHLY333/6158 < https://www.hucc-coop.tw/monthly/PUBCATMONTHLY333/6158> .

17. In the case studied by Giang Nguyen-Thu, she problematizes the process of food whose symbol was turned from hope to danger and indicates that the concept of "dirty food" and people's reactions to it reflect some larger issues beyond food consumption, such as the stuckness of mothers in Vietnam. Giang Nguyen-Thu, "Hectic Slowness: Digital Temporalities of Precarious Care from a Global South Perspective," *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 8 (May 4, 2021): 1936–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1921825 < https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1921825> .

18. Similar reasons are often seen in the narratives of some participants of HUF, who support their coop because of food safety scandals or their sick families.

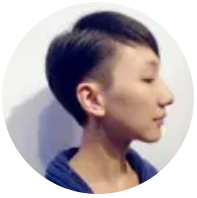
19. Seungsook Moon, "Women's Food Work, Food Citizenship, & Transnational Consumer Capitalism: A Case Study of a Feminist Food Cooperative in South Korea," *Food, Culture & Society* (March 26, 2021):1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.1892255 < https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.1892255> .

20. Continuing the context of Japanese alternative food movements, HUCC borrows the term "life makers" (Shenghuo zhe) to encourage its members to be more conscious of every aspect of life and the changes they can bring to this world. However, on the website of HUCC, the only section related to life makers is "Shenghuo Jhe Jhoubao," a weekly feature promoting seasonal food and environmentally friendly products. Moreover, in recent years, there have always been rumors about the mismanagement of the cooperative. In 2018, a general manager without experience in participating in

the cooperative was appointed to HUCC for her professional background in marketing and management. Later in 2020, the chlorinated chicken scandal caused a trust issue between the cooperative members and its management, which shook the center of this interpersonal network—trust. ↩

21. Jun-ren Li , "Mama Chuji—Sin Huanjing Jhufu Lianmeng " (Moms on the Move—the New Environment Homemakers League), *Xingyuan* (Doctor's Apricot Orchard) 35 (June 1987). ↩

Author Information



Kris Chi

Kris Chi is an independent researcher, non-school-based experimental educator, and translator, who has benefited greatly from the Interasia network and training of cultural studies. She received her MA from the National Central University Department of English. In her thesis, she formed the politics of the domestic by examining the identity building of Taiwan as a country and the development of family-related knowledge and institutions. Her research interest focuses on (migrant or domestic) labour, domesticity whose intertwined relationship with political economy, knowledge production and cold war politics especially in Asia.

View all of Kris Chi's articles.

Article details

Kris Chi, "From Housewives to Homemakers: Civic Engagement, Imagination, and Déjà Vu in Taiwan," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.11

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

"Cooking in Someone Else's Kitchen": Exploring Food as a Commonplace for Antiracist Pedagogy, White Allyship, and Feeding Civic Imagination

by E. Vivian Leigh | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Asao Inoue's metaphor "cooking in someone else's kitchen" provides a conceptual framework describing how white educators may navigate teaching topics outside of the subject positions they occupy. I apply an intentionally literal interpretation of Inoue's metaphor, to position food culture as an important component of social justice pedagogy. As post-secondary institutions prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, antiracist pedagogies have become a source of uneasiness for many white educators. Often, these educators may give excuses stemming from embodied positionality and fear of saying something wrong, which may become reasons to avoid difficult classroom conversations. As a result, universities lose opportunities to educate students about race-related issues, along with the potential for increased civic engagement. This paper addresses white teachers' apprehension surrounding antiracist pedagogy and presents a food-themed writing course focused on how food has been weaponized historically, contributing to racial, class, and gender injustice—and how similar systems of oppression are still in effect currently. The course centers food as a commonplace to explore race, racism, and cultural difference—while helping teachers gain confidence in joining antiracist efforts.

KEYWORDS anti-racism, civic engagement, food, pedagogy

As a white, antiracist educator I continually grapple with my own embodied positionality. My initial struggle led me to situate food as a commonplace, or access point, to explore racial and cultural identities. *Commonplace* in this context is synonymous with Aristotle's term *topoi* which locates places in general

subjects to make nuanced arguments."[1] Positioning food as a commonplace creates a space to explore oppression, racism, and social issues through the shared familiarity of food. The collective connections aid in understanding social issues despite varying levels of social consciousness among students because "classrooms are not homogeneous environments with a common understanding of oppression, but deeply divided places where contested narratives are steeped in the politics of emotions [which] create complex emotional and intellectual challenges for educators."[2] I contend that examining social justice through food may encourage other hesitant white educators to engage antiracist curriculums. As post-secondary education calls for increased efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, it cannot be overlooked that "more than 85% of urban educators are white in the face of an increasingly multiracial, multicultural, multilingual student body."[3] When an educator does not occupy subject positions about which they are teaching, but their students do, it can provide a challenge . Struggles similar to mine may occur when white educators fear accusations of misrepresenting a community or communities to which they do not belong. Underlying this uneasiness, Mara Holt states, is the feeling of being unprepared, the worry of doing more harm than good, and beliefs that others are more qualified, leading white educators to buy into the myth that such instructors "exist in abundance, are close by, and should be doing it instead of us."[4] And there is an unfortunate narrative and set of expectations that BIPOC teachers are best suited to do this kind of work—which has often given white educators a path of avoidance. However, Asao Inoue argues that white teachers should "be the first in line" for antiracist activism and likens the feelings of unpreparedness to "cooking in someone else's kitchen."[5] Inoue uses this metaphor to explain how some white educators don't know what resources to use, what may be off-limits, and what they can bring to conversations outside of the subject positions they occupy.

In negotiating feeling unprepared to "cook in someone else's kitchen," I apply an intentionally literal interpretation of Inoue's metaphor, to bridge the relationship between food and identity in classrooms. Prompting this is the idea that "food

studies can . . . constitute a new movement, not only as an academic discipline but also as a means to change society,"[6] along with Marion Nestle's claim that scholarly interest in food studies is now an approach to cultural, behavioral, historical, socioeconomic, and biological research,[7] thus outlining shared goals with antiracist pedagogy. Bearing these perspectives in mind, I designed a First-Year Writing course that establishes aspects of food culture as sites to locate social injustices and make deeper connections to systems of oppression enacted through food-related practices. Examining racial and cultural identities through food provided the critical distance necessary for me to better understand the challenges and complexities of antiracist pedagogy, which in turn developed my understanding of my role as an antiracist educator. Although I developed this course from a perspective rooted in whiteness, it is important to recognize that it can still be valuable to BIPOC educators as well. Overall, my intent is to ease some of the burden placed on BIPOC educators and increase white allyship. For teachers interested in social justice–based education, this approach provides a useful model for introducing difficult subjects and conversations in culturally responsive ways. The collective understanding and/or relearning of how people relate to what they eat contributes to civic imagination by encouraging students to critically evaluate their subject positions and situatedness in cultural and historical contexts. Subsequently, they may leave the classroom with an enhanced capacity for forging cross-cultural relationships and building coalitions based on principles of interconnectedness.

The course follows the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing developed by one of the governing professional bodies in writing studies, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). Primary learning objectives include rhetorical awareness, critical thinking skills, and knowledge of writing processes and conventions. Secondary objectives took the form of goals based in cultural competence, which can be loosely defined as a set of organizational principles that engage cultural, linguistic, and other human differences in a generative manner built on understanding and empathy.

My interest in cultural competence as a learning outcome emerged from teaching at a predominantly white, mid-sized research institution in rural Appalachia. The campus environment was increasingly marked by hostility and racial strife in the context of the 2016 presidential election and the Black Lives Matter movement. The cultural competence goals were a curricular intervention proposed by the director of Composition and implemented by a team of invested teachers, of which I was a member. My food-themed course stemmed from this experience, in part to test the goals application in other courses. I selected topics that fit within each unit's genre-based goals, intentionally selecting topics and readings to explore contemporary social issues through food.

Sample Assignments/Materials

The class is designed on the premise that food is not neutral ground because it is embedded in complex histories of colonialism, slavery, and survival. The assigned text is Lunsford et al.'s *Everyone's an Author* with five units organized around specific course objectives. Each unit culminates with a major project to apply learned concepts. Major projects may take the form of traditional writing assignments (essays) or a multimodal equivalent (projects composed by combining multiple modes including words, images, audio, hyperlinks and/or video). Additional supplemental materials and discussion topics (outlined below) are incorporated to unify the food theme and social issues.

Unit 1: Food and Identity

Narrative writing helps students situate themselves within the course theme while learning about food's impacts on facets of identity. Students are asked to notice details and question possible hidden meanings. The combination engages civic imagination by challenging inequities in representation.

Major Assignment: Writing a narrative (or scripted podcast). Students describe an event or experience with food and how it changed or impacted them through understanding their culture, ethnic, or religious identity.

Artifact for Analysis:

- Reading: *The Subtle Racism Around Us (Even in a Cup of Coffee)* by Hinda Mandell

Discussion Topic:

- Coffee branding, racial identity, and institutionalized racism
- Rebranding products like Aunt Jemima syrup and Uncle Ben's rice

Unit 2: Food Histories

The second unit contextualizes food's connection to identity and culture through food histories. Students gain insights on inequity by also considering structural oppression through the lens of literacy and privilege.

Major Assignment: Reporting information (or visual essay). Students analyze the historical/cultural relevance of a particular food and its connection(s) to identity.

Artifacts for Analysis:

- Documentary: *The Search for General Tso* by Jennifer 8 Lee
- Reading: "The Un-Pretty History of Georgia's Iconic Peach" by Tove Danovich

Discussion Topics:

- How minoritized groups used food to gain acceptance in white communities
- White-washing history
- Oppressive literacy practices

Unit 3: Food Politics

Racism and controversy surrounding the Confederate flag are addressed through food. Injustice and class privilege are further engaged through food access and food deserts. The reading selections encourage civic imagination through compassion and building community.

Major Assignment: Arguing a Position (or class-wide debate). Students argue a position on a debatable food-related topic, responding to what others have said and providing appropriate background information.

Artifact for Analysis:

- Reading: "A Confederacy of Sauces" by Jack Hitt

Discussion Topic:

- Charlottesville, the Confederate flag, and racial tension
- Class privilege and food deserts as primary sites of food injustice
- Race- and class-based inequity through gentrification

Unit 4: Food and Ethics

Compassion and ethics are connected through agricultural working conditions and human rights. The selected materials work in conversation with one another and model how to research a topic from multiple perspectives. Civic imagination is engaged through analyzing grassroots activism.

Major Assignment: Writing Analytically|Rogerian Argument. Students practice ethical evaluation through researching a food-related issue and from multiple perspectives.

Artifacts for Analysis:

- Documentary: *Food Chains*, developed by Eva Longoria and Eric Schlosser

- Reading: “Building a Better Tomato” by Barry Estabrook
- Broadcast: NPR 1A “Fair Treatment, Fast Food And The Fight Of The Coalition Of Immokalee Workers”

Discussion Topic:

- The poor treatment of migrant workers and human rights
- Cognitive dissonance purchasing brands that mistreat workers
- Grassroots activism that can extend beyond agriculture to all labor contexts

Unit 5: Food and Culture

Students analyze culture through restaurants and reflect on knowledge gained over the semester surrounding how food influences conceptualizations of culture and identity. Students also discuss ways that food impacts systems of oppression and liberation.

Major Assignment: Writing a Review. Students write an online review after going to a local restaurant with classmates to rhetorically analyze the theme, design, and menu, while building community.

The course culminates with students submitting a self-reflection considering the ways food impacts how they write, talk, think, and feel about identity and broader social inequities, and how food-related education and activism can foster change.

Implications

I started locating unsavory food histories knowing that systems of oppression are often intertwined. Food can encourage intervention against oppression because “food is clearly a link among generations of immigrants and exiles; those who cook and write about food are “culture-tenders” and at the same time teach

people outside the cultural community about that community's values, rituals, [and] beliefs."[8] When food is explored in terms of empowerment and subjugation, food histories enable increased understanding of inequity and social justice.

These histories are encompassed by the umbrella term "food justice," which Gottlieb and Joshi define as "movements in the food system to alleviate racial and gendered injustices and uneven access to healthy food, engage[ing] questions of the environment, land use and farming, health, immigration, worker rights, economic and community development, cultural integrity, and social justice."[9] And when food systems and practices contribute to injustice, the frameworks of food justice provide ways to recognize effective interventions.

Student Output and Assessment

While the course engages antiracist practices, white students often feel similar tensions to those of white instructors in terms of worrying about speaking out of place. To encourage meaningful discussions, I begin the semester by addressing these tensions head on. In the first week of class, I orient the classroom as a constructive learning environment, not a destructive one, and set the intention for our classroom to be a space that builds students up, enhancing their strengths, and not a place to tear people down. I remind students that the course covers sensitive content and state that I do not expect all students to share the same views, or to arrive at the same stance. I also let them know that I welcome voices of dissent, and do not expect anyone to merely say what they think I want them to say. Instead, I let them know that I see my job as providing multiple perspectives, but it is up to them to decide what to do with the information they are provided. I also make it very clear that because we are in a space of learning, students should be willing to grant each other compassion, or at least grace, in order to process information and learn new things. I tell students that people may have missteps along the way, and that is okay. And I explain that should a student need to apologize for a misstep, the class can benefit from understanding what might

have been offensive or upsetting and why, and that we can see it as a teaching and learning moment for growth and move forward productively.

At times, some white students may struggle to develop a stronger critical lens toward racism claiming they do not see racism happening around them, or focusing on ideas of "reverse racism," or illustrating a general lack of sensitivity in understanding how racism impacts people they may not interact with. In these instances, I let go of feeling like I need to change their views. I acknowledge the feelings that students believe are truthful and let them grapple with their viewpoints alongside the materials presented through the course. Included in this material are perspectives of BIPOC students who were able to use the class as an opportunity to explore various facets of their identities through writing. Though the class is not a creative writing course, students often found avenues for creative forms of expression. For example, one student crafted a narrative about food traditions in his extended family with portions written in Spanish (and translated). His paper allowed students to understand a nuanced outlook on linguistic dominance and conversations around English as the perceived official language of America.

Success in antiracist pedagogy, particularly in terms of cultivating a civic imagination can be measured by several key indicators including the following:

- *An inclusive curriculum* with diverse perspectives that address issues of racial injustice and challenge grand narratives.
- *A safe and inclusive classroom environment*. As mentioned previously, the classroom should be considered a constructive learning space where students of all backgrounds feel respected, heard, and valued.
- *Critical thinking and analysis.* Assignments and activities that explore complex issues related to racism in multiple contexts including academic and social settings.
- *Increased awareness and compassion.* When connecting learning to real-world experiences, I used to put empathy in place of compassion but find that students respond better to being asked to understand what it means to be compassionate, rather than feeling required to display empathy.

- *An antiracist approach to assessment practices* that aligns assignment criteria with antiracist goals; allows choice and autonomy; and provides clear, transparent grading criteria with rubrics. I evaluate students' abilities to analyze the major course themes and topics, rather than their ability to restate information provided to them.

Reflection

Initially, my positionality led me to feel I needed the food-themed topics in case classroom discussions became heated, to shift the focus back to food. But I learned I did not need to rely on food to moderate conversations because my students embraced talking about social issues. Many stated our class was the first place they could have such discussions outside of their families and like-minded communities and learn about views differing from their own. The curriculum might be received differently by various audiences, but I have learned the content allows BIPOC students to be content experts, instead of the content reinforcing the dominant view of white students. Additionally, students have sent emails thanking me for being willing to "go there" with discussions about race and social issues. Conversely, I also learned students who harbor racist sentiment will entertain material I present *because* I am white, and I contend that white educators need to be willing to sit with the discomfort that brings.

Positioning food as a commonplace to engage antiracist pedagogy contributes to the concept of civic imagination in three primary ways: 1) White educators can draw on the lens of food to gain confidence teaching perspectives outside of their embodied positionalities; 2) Food can increase understandings of systems of oppression that extend to greater contexts; and 3) Food may encourage civic action by outlining accessible forms of activism. Situating social issues within food while presenting food culture as a pathway to equity and social justice helped me embrace antiracist pedagogy. Encouraging students to engage civic imagination and advocating alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or

economic conditions needs to be a collective effort. And white educators should be available to talk with unsure allies about their discomfort, missteps, and how to keep cooking in someone else's kitchen, even when they feel unable to stand the heat.

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Author Information

E. Vivian Leigh

E. Vivian Leigh is an Assistant Professor of Professional Communication at Clarkson University. She holds a PhD in English Rhetoric and Composition from Ohio University. Leigh's research interests explore social justice initiatives through intersectional approaches to feminist studies, while forging connections between bodily rhetorics, food studies, antiracist activism, and communication pedagogies. Her published essays and forthcoming book delve into representations of women, while her forthcoming articles explore the importance of anti-racist pedagogy.

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Article details

E. Vivian Leigh, "'Cooking in Someone Else's Kitchen': Exploring Food as a Commonplace for Antiracist Pedagogy, White Allyship, and Feeding Civic Imagination," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.12

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

They Broke Bread with Sincere Hearts: Imagining New Gymnastics Cultures

by Briana Ellerbe | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT This article discusses everyday acts of resistance through two stories of bread in competitive gymnastics through the lens of infrapolitics and hidden transcripts. The author discusses how the culture of elite competitive gymnastics sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate methods of coaching and care—often giving rise to infrapolitical acts. Furthermore, the article centers Larry Nassar's cooptation of gymnasts' hidden transcripts—particularly around food—as a strategy to further his abuse of hundreds of athletes. Finally, through the concept of the civic imagination, the author encourages the gymnastics community to begin to engage in open discussions over meals toward change in gymnastics cultures.

KEYWORDS bread, civic imagination, gymnastics, infrapolitics

After performing for hours in a gymnastics competition to showcase our abilities to college recruiters, our team sat down to eat dinner and our stomachs growled in anticipation. I scanned the menu and decided on a cheeseburger and fries. Our waitress walked up to our table with a basket loaded with freshly baked bread covered with a crisp white towel. Just as we were about to eat, our coach yelled, "Put that bread down!" Bread fell to the table and onto the floor. Our coach went on to explain that white bread was poisonous and detrimental to our health. She kindly asked the waitress to take the bread back. Shocked onlookers pretended they weren't watching and listening intently. The waitress complied and sarcastically added, "I guess this table won't be having dessert."

Shortly after, I felt my teammate tap the side of my thigh under the table. I looked down to see a piece of bread in her hand. Unbeknownst to me, my teammates had been passing a piece of bread beneath the table as our coach told us about its evils. I broke a piece off and held it nervously. When my coach turned away from me, I threw it into my mouth. As the bread morsels melted there, I thought, "You can't tell me what to do"—a thought that I felt was laughably untrue outside of the privacy of my own mind. I looked around at my smirking teammates who had already participated in the same act. Through this action, we communicated a sense of solidarity, rebellion, and empowerment. Though our coach had good intentions in directing us to refrain from a food she believed had little nutritional value, I personally pushed back against what felt like constant pressure. Specifically, the sport often made me feel that not much was in my control—from bodily injury to hyper-management of my time and the evaluation (i.e., out of a "perfect 10.0") of my athletic performances. While I loved the sport, I battled a fear of judgment based on my life performances and equated my self-worth to others' evaluations. These feelings often tempted me not to try at all, rather than to try and fall short of others' expectations. Thankfully, now through my personal faith, I am reminded that I am loved—beyond and despite my own works—by a higher power. However, at the time, this tiny win felt momentous. Alas, when the time finally came to order dinner, I asked for a grilled chicken salad and my stomach grumbled in protest.

Bread has attached to it much symbolic significance. Biblically, for example, bread signifies physical and spiritual sustenance: "Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not go hungry."[1] It also signifies shared community ("They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts").[2] Another example is the popular line regarding peasants in the French Revolution often attributed to Marie Antoinette: "If the people have no bread, then let them eat cake."[3] Furthermore, one trend in the popular imagination regarding health and nutrition associates bread with excessive carbohydrates, spiked blood sugar, and weight gain.[4] This would explain our coach's disdain for

white bread. A simple mixture of flour, yeast, and water can point to dynamics of power, politics, and the human condition.

My story about bread reigns in my memory as one of *infrapolitics*. James C. Scott utilizes this term to describe a political struggle that does not operate through open, public defiance.[5] Rather, this form of resistance often occurs unbeknownst to those in power, or in ways that are seemingly, for the most part, in compliance with expectations or norms. In an attempt to understand class and power relations in a Malay village, Scott observed the ways in which communicative interactions took place, and especially how interactions between those in power and those in subordinate positions transpired differently in public versus in private. Scott calls these interactions *transcripts*, with *public transcripts* "describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate."[6] He describes *hidden transcripts* as those that occur "'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."[7] Within the otherwise seemingly fixed structure of power, hidden transcripts can contradict the deference and obedience present in public transcripts, suggesting a struggle over power both in and out of plain sight. While some consider gymnastics to be a mere after-school activity, it lends itself to clearly demarcated power structures. For a large part of their waking hours, competitive gymnasts follow the instructions of the adults in the gym. Gymnasts entrust their futures (e.g., hopes for elite and Olympic competition or for college scholarships) to the hands of the adults who sometimes have more time with and influence over gymnasts than their parents do. While mine is a lighthearted bread story in a low-stakes environment, I have pondered the severity of other, more serious, circumstances in which gymnasts participate in infrapolitics.

In 2016, the *Indianapolis Star* published an article on allegations of sexual misconduct by athletic trainer Larry Nassar: a trusted team doctor for USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University.[8] According to an editor's note, after the release of that article, over 150 more people came forward with allegations against him. Some of these athletes were featured in the 2020 Netflix

documentary *Athlete A*. A haunting takeaway of the documentary was that Nassar, in a clearly abusive culture, was viewed as one of the nicest and most trustworthy adults. In the midst of the frenzy of media stories exposing Nassar's abuse, *Athlete A* demonstrates the harrowing fact that Nassar gained athletes' trust through the cooptation of their hidden transcripts.

Scott posits that "the relationship between dominant elites and subordinates is . . . very much of a material struggle in which both sides are continually probing for weaknesses and exploiting small advantages."[9] Much of Nassar's advantage was the culture of the sport itself and the behavior of the coaches, especially for the elite-level gymnasts. In *Athlete A*, Jennifer Sey, the 1986 USA Gymnastics national champion, explained that "emotional and physical abuse was actually the norm" in her training.[10] Gymnasts in *Athlete A*, and also in their victim impact statements, made it clear that Nassar was well aware of this abuse from the coaches, and positioned himself as a friend. Jamie Dantcher, a former Olympian in the 2000 games, stated in her impact statement, "Larry, you saw all the physical, mental and emotional abuse from our coaches and USAG national staff. You pretended to be on my side, calling all of them the monsters. But instead of protecting children and reporting the abuse you saw, you used your position of power to manipulate and abuse as well. You knew I was powerless."[11] Another survivor, Kaylee McDowell, stated: "You always had my side when [my coach] John Geddert did not . . . which was always . . .You had a close bond with John as well. You were dearest friends, but would talk about him like he was the devil himself behind his back."[12] This is echoed by Mattie Larson in her impact statement: "We would joke around, and you would even listen when I tell you how mean my coaches and Martha [Karolyi] was. I truly thought you understood. You took complete advantage of my innocence."[13] Jordyn Wieber, a former Olympian and survivor of Nassar's abuse, stated that "He figured out his victims' vulnerabilities and exploited them, casting himself as the nice guy in a demanding, high-stress atmosphere."[14] Former Olympian McKayla Maroney stated: "He always had a sympathetic ear for complaints about our coaches.[15] The fact that

Nassar was not a coach, but a doctor entrusted with the gymnasts' health, placed him in a position in which he appeared to be authority-adjacent, and a listening ear for their complaints. In such a restrictive environment, these complaints were one of the only ways the gymnasts felt they could push back on their coaches' overbearing and abusive authority.

Furthermore, Nassar was aware of the restrictive culture around food and the high pressure these elite gymnasts felt to be skinny. For example, Jamie Dantzcher recalled an incident in which she lost six pounds from having the flu, and her coach told her to figure out how to keep it off.[16] Mattie Larson, in describing her experience at the Karolyi ranch—the famous training facility in a remote area of Texas, at which athletes were subjected monthly to Nassar's abuse—stated that they "lived off of the snacks that [they] had to sneak in their luggage."[17] Aware of this restrictive culture around eating, Nassar again positioned himself as a friend by taking part in the covert provision of food and snacks. Mattie Larson went on to say about the training camp, "He would even give us candy or junk food which was completely forbidden."[18] McKayla Maroney stated, "He would bring us food and coffee at the Olympics when we were hungry. I didn't know that these were all grooming techniques that he used to manipulate and brainwash me into trusting him."[19] Maroney specifically said that he would purchase caramel macchiatos and loaves of bread for her. Jamie Dantzcher echoes these accounts: "He would sneak us food and candy, and leave stuff under our pillows."[20]

Nassar had access to the gymnasts' hidden transcripts–namely, knowledge through both conversation and observation that they were unhappy with their coaches and hungry—and lent an ear to their offstage complaints. He provided material solutions to their hunger, posing as an ally while building his own abusive structure of power. Several other gymnasts in *Athlete A* recall the ways in which Nassar positioned himself as a friend, often through secretly satisfying a basic need.[21] In this case, "love and concern" were guises for abuse. Former champion Jennifer Sey states in the film, "You know, these kids go to these national training

centers when they're ten years old. They are abused and mistreated for years. So even by the time they're of age, the line between tough coaching and child abuse gets blurred. So then when real, like obvious abuse—sexual abuse—happens, you already don't believe your own take on things."[22] These gymnasts had to discern a "fine line" between the genuine concern of adults on one end of the spectrum and abuse on the other. The classic line, "I'm hard on you because I love you," is difficult for young gymnasts to navigate—especially when those tough methods can result in measurable and significant success. Nassar clearly crossed boundaries and harmed gymnasts; the murky waters of elite competitive gymnastics culture, alongside the negligence of the adults in power, allowed his abuse to continue for decades.

In this article, I have discussed two very different stories in which bread—or food more broadly—featured in gymnasts' quotidian acts of resistance. In my personal story, we engaged in infrapolitics that resulted in a sense of peer bonding and empowerment. In the second story, a resistance strategy (e.g., sneaking food into suitcases or complaining about coaches) was observed, manipulated, and coopted by someone with existing power. As concealed "bread," or food more broadly, was central to both of these stories, I would like to imagine how food can instead be used openly in the imagination of new gymnastics cultures.

Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova define the civic imagination as "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions."[23] They highlight the importance of being able to imagine a different world in making change, and seeing oneself as a "capable" "civic agent" in bringing that change to pass in solidarity with others.[24] Each member of the gymnastics community, including gymnasts, coaches, parents, and medical professionals, has a role in shaping its culture along with the wellbeing, safety, and success of the gymnasts. Furthermore, the amount of time and dedication that gymnasts allot to the sport means that the sport, in turn, often shapes them as people and as civic agents in the broader world outside of

gymnastics. After the Nassar event, US gymnastics culture is under a microscope, with strong pleas to reimagine its norms and structures.

Scholars have pointed to food as a potential form of intercultural communication and community building.[25] Given the significance of food in the stories of some Nassar survivors, the US gymnastics community could begin to imagine new gymnastics structures over food; they could regularly "break bread with sincere hearts," with a vulnerable openness to feedback and change. These events could be local (i.e., with participants from one gymnastics training center), regional (i.e., a collection of gyms within the same region), or national. They could involve gymnasts, their families, coaches, nutritionists, sports psychologists, therapists, and others like team doctors who regularly provide care to the gymnasts. Events could take place outside of the usual practice gyms so as to remove participants from the normal structures of power. Participants at these events could eat delectable, hearty meals (free of judgment) and engage in various activities such as conversations, reflections, conflict-resolution, letter-writing, art, poetry, role-play, and panels. Furthermore, there would need to be an assurance that any heart-to-heart conversations or conflict would not be met with retaliation in the gym personally or politically. The goal of breaking bread together is to imagine alternatives to existing gymnastics cultures that center on building community, accountability, and removing any fear from addressing serious concerns long before meetings like the Larry Nassar hearings are necessary.

These events would also have the potential to strengthen many of the wonderful things about existing gymnastics culture, such as healthy intergenerational communication and mentorship, team building, character formation, and friendship. In an era in which a call for change within gymnastics is thrust to the spotlight, these would be opportunities to collectively participate in the formation of healthy everyday gymnastics practices. We must recognize gymnastics as a highly political sphere worthy of civic imagination efforts. Breaking bread can be viewed as an act of solidarity and a breaking down of existing power structures

within the sport in an effort to imagine more loving and safer gymnastics cultures. Other communities—especially those that serve minors or other vulnerable groups—should view Nassar's actions as an example of how liberatory strategies have the potential to be used against those who participate in them; with this in mind, it is important to *quickly*, safely, and openly discuss gymnasts' concerns at the root. Ultimately, we can imagine a gymnastics culture rooted in the love of the sport, and one that is free even from the need for infrapolitics—especially around a basic need like food. Centering those imaginative practices in intentional, caring ways around food—a symbol that is both used as a tool for resistance and as a tool for manipulation—could be a good start.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Petal Samuel and the Civic Paths and *Lateral* editorial team for their thoughtful and generous feedback and conversation, which aided tremendously in the writing of this article.

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Author Information

Briana Ellerbe

Briana Ellerbe is an interdisciplinary scholar and media consultant whose work focuses on the ways in which groups navigate structures of power in media, education, and sports. She is especially interested in the ways in which children and families incorporate media content into their everyday lives, and is curious about whether and how media impact children's worldviews, relationships, and learning. With this in mind, she is passionate about the thoughtful creation of content for children and their families. After completing her PhD in Communication at USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, she worked as a researcher and consultant on projects for Google and Toca Boca, and as a Production Assistant at Tinkercast. Previously, she worked as a Research Manager at the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop and as a Research Assistant for 9 Story USA. Briana received her master's from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the Technology, Innovation, and Education program and her BA at the University of Pennsylvania.

View all of Briana Ellerbe's articles.

Article details

Briana Ellerbe, "They Broke Bread with Sincere Hearts: Imagining New Gymnastics Cultures," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.13

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Holy Wine Online: Deir Cremisan in Digital Space

by Jennifer Ruth Shutek | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT This article focuses on the visual materials of the Cremisan Winery Estate's Facebook page to argue that Cremisan's digital presence is complex and multivocal, eschewing binaries of digital food activism or consumer-oriented marketing. My approach (using digital and "analog" research) grounds media analysis in site visits and sees digital content as a method of creatively resisting oppressive structures and digital space as locations in which interactions occur. I suggest that Deir Cremisan's Facebook page participates in a complex discourse between contemporary political debates, piety, local and international commodity markets, and the pragmatics of the daily operations of running a vineyard and winery.

KEYWORDS Palestine, activism, digital, ethnography, social media, wine

A narrow, undulating road that snakes through the brambly beige aridity of the West Bank opens into the small oasis of Deir Cremisan, a nineteenth-century monastery and winery in Beit Jala that produces wines, spirits, and olive oil. Standing on the grounds of the winery, which are dotted with deep-red flowers and overlooking the terraced slopes of grape vines, you can see the Israeli settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo on nearby hills. The winery's interior is cool, the stone floors creating gentle echoes as we walk past the steel and oak barrels in which wine ferments. During a private tour of Deir Cremisan in 2017, my guide shared that the land sits on a natural aquifer and provides employment to Palestinians and financial support for their families.

My next attempt to visit the winery, in March 2018, was interrupted by a barrier, built of rods of metal inserted into concrete foundations, chain-link fencing, and spools of barbed wire spilled along the top. This fence is a part of the ongoing extensions of Israel's separation barrier, justified by Israel as a security measure. Although the barrier through Deir Cremisan was unfinished, its purposes were clear: to disrupt movement and agricultural activity, create visual obstacles, deter visitors, and assert Israeli control.

Looking at the Cremisan Wine Estate's Facebook page, however, one would not know about this extension of Israeli occupation. Cremisan Winery's social media presence has an ambiguous relationship to politics and activism. The vineyard and winery are in Area A (areas of the West Bank under full control of the Palestinian Authority), are operated exclusively by Palestinians, and have been bisected by the separation barrier. While many articles refer to the West Bank as "Occupied Palestinian Territory") or its impacts on producing and exporting wine, the Facebook page does not "perform" its politics overtly

through references to, *inter alia*, Israeli occupation. These conspicuous omissions raise questions about the winery's relationship with social media and its identity in digital spaces. This piece discusses part of an ongoing project, which I started in 2018. I have carried out digital ethnographic research, including participant observation of Deir Cremisan's Facebook page (a public page maintained by Fadi Batarseh, the chief winemaker).[1] My digital ethnographic research on Deir Cremisan's Facebook page is grounded in my visits to the winery, semi-structured interviews, and close readings of several hundred consumer reviews of Deir Cremisan wines.

I focus on the visual materials of the Cremisan Winery Estate's Facebook page to argue that Cremisan's digital presence is complex and multivocal, eschewing binaries of digital food activism or consumer-oriented marketing. Instead, Deir Cremisan's Facebook page and products highlight the beauty of the landscape and the quality of its wines and spirits to sell products that, ultimately, provide employment for Palestinian families living under the constant threats of occupation. Many agricultural initiatives and collectives in the West Bank are overtly political in their digital self-fashioning and product packaging. For instance, over 1,400 Palestinian farmers are members of the Palestine Fair Trade Association, an organization that assists Palestinian producers to obtain fair trade certification and find international markets for Palestinian food products including olive oil, za'atar, honey, and freekeh.[2] On a smaller scale, The Kale Project was established in 2015 in rural Jenin to provide Palestinians with access to local, high-quality produce; its founder speaks openly about the challenges of Israeli occupation for Palestinian sovereignty and food sovereignty.[3]

Digital Discourses of Palestinian Wine

While not mentioning Palestinian labor or Israeli occupation explicitly, Deir Cremisan's Facebook page facilitates the imagination of the winery operating otherwise: beyond constant control and surveillance by Israeli military forces and without being defined in conflict-reductive terms. The use of non-tangible, digital space to imagine otherwise functions as a response to the physical lack of such a space. In the absence of freedom of mobility and trade for Palestinians, Deir Cremisan's Facebook page creates, through its posts that dialogue asynchronously with audiences around the world, a location in which a greater deal of liberty and equity can be experienced.

My work is informed by "the digital turn in food practices, politics, and activism" and culinary culture as a "site of everyday politics and ethics," including in the digital sphere.[4] I collect texts and images from social media accounts over a period of several weeks, months, or years; this long-term, granular approach helps to "problematise reductionist understandings of "the digital" and reflect the porous boundaries between "digital" and "analogue" food."[5] My use of digital and "analog" research grounds media analysis in digital

ethnographic approaches and site visits, seeing digital content as both primary documents and as a place in which interactions occur.[6]

Food is political and politicized, and the literature on foodways in Palestine/Israel is rich.[7] The West Bank wines and spirits produced by Deir Cremisan are "commodit[ies] in motion," with lives of their own within and beyond Deir Cremisan.[8] These lives pull the winery into political and religious discussions.[9] In the context of viral social justice movements like #MeToo and #BLM, activism is articulated and debated online, and the importance of consumer activism has been discussed extensively.[10] Perhaps surprisingly, however, the Deir Cremisan Facebook page and many consumers discuss the wine as neither Palestinian nor Israeli, but as "wine of the holy land," seemingly evidencing Monterescu and Handel's observation that Cremisan wine can be categorized as "Palestinian," "Israeli," or "apolitical."[11] Yet, I suggest that avoiding the use of these terms is part of the winery's pragmatic politics, allowing it to concentrate on wine production and employment for Palestinians.

The Holy Land on Facebook: Deir Cremisan's Visual Rhetoric

The Cremisan Estate Facebook page, whose handle "@CremisanWineEstate1885" refers to the date of the monastery's establishment, contains approximately 760 photos, which I divide into four main categories: landscape images (vineyards, harvests, and fermentation processes), international events (visitors to the winery), institutional capital (Deir Cremisan's participation in and awards from local and international wine festivals and competitions), and finished products (wines, brandies, 'araq, etc.). The types of posts most common on the Facebook page allow the page to perform several functions.

The first function of the Facebook posts is to root Cremisan Winery within its local community. These posts demonstrate Cremisan Winery's ties to local retailers such as the Bethlehem market and boutique shops in Beit Jala and Beit Sahour where its products are sold. For example, a post in Arabic from March 2020 relates how the winery supported Bethlehem pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic by distributing alcohol to them.

Another post, from December 2019, includes a link to a "B is for Bacchus" podcast featuring the winery, which discusses "the importance of using local indigenous varieties." Other photos show wine bottle labels with "West Bank" and "autochthonous dry red wine," the most overt references to debates over land ownership. Visitors to the page see that the winery participates in its community through benevolence, as well as through discourses of indigeneity. The latter suggests that Palestinians in the West Bank connect to the land through the foods they cultivate and produce.[12]

Second, the Facebook page illustrates the winery's international presence and connections to global markets of trade and solidarity. It promotes products for global export, like brandy for export to the United States; showcases official global ties including visits from politicians; and demonstrates international support through photos and videos of visits from international tour groups. It is interesting to note that most comments (in Arabic or English) appear apolitical; most people "like" posts, and, if followers post comments, they include a "congratulations," a positive comment about the wines, or an inquiry about where to purchase the wine.

https://www.facebook.com/CremisanWinery1885/photos/pb.100057414372592.-2207520000

type=3>

Figure 1. This 2017 post shows Deir Cremisan's Baladi, Dabouki, Baladi, and Hamdani/Jandali wines with medals from an international wine competition.

Third, the page creates and reiterates a narrative that locates Deir Cremisan in the Holy Land. This self-fashioning allows the wines, spirits, and oils produced by the winery to take on fluid meanings and to participate in consumer solidarity with Palestinians by emphasizing the grapes' West Bank terroir. At the same time, the wines can be packaged

as part of an experience of the land of the Bible (and Torah), sidestepping vehement contemporary debates about occupation, Palestinian independence, and Zionism.[13] The "About" section of the Facebook page locates Deir Cremisan's beginnings with Italian missionary Fr. Antonio Bellone, who, in the 1860s, established orphanages and a religious educational house. The winery provided work for locals and income for the educational house. After Fr. Bellone joined the Salesian order, the order supported the winery and mission. The Facebook posts never mention Israel, nor do the photos or videos depict the separation barrier that bisects the winery's lands. I argue that this decision creates a "palatable authenticity," using discourses of localness and religiosity that assert legitimacy without engaging in explicitly political topics, while supporting the logistics and economics of running a vineyard and winery.[14]

Deir Cremisan's Facebook page participates in a complex discourse between contemporary political debates, piety, local and international commodity markets, and the pragmatics of running a vineyard and winery while providing employment to Palestinians. The interconnectedness of public relations agendas and the grassroots reactions in public Facebook posts informs how the winery navigates a tense political climate while endeavoring to run a successful business. Long-term observation of the social media activities of Deir Cremisan adds nuance to understandings of the political, economic, and cultural importance of the winery and, more broadly, the ways in which foodways shed light on various actors' involvement in political and consumer activism. In the case of Deir Cremisan, navigating a delicate balance of competing needs and resisting the hegemonic presence of Israeli occupation at times takes a perhaps surprising form—one that avoids overtly political digital activism to creatively resist Israeli structures of occupation, imagining a winery that does not live in the shadows of a separation barrier.

Notes

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Author Information

Jennifer Ruth Shutek

Jennifer Ruth Shutek pursued their BA at Simon Fraser University with a major in history, a minor in English literature, and a concentration in French. She then earned her MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Oxford and obtained an MPhil and PhD in Food Studies from New York University. Throughout their academic career, Jennifer has travelled extensively, living in Oxford, Fez, New York, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Tel Aviv. Over a decade of teaching has given Jennifer rich pedagogical experience. As well as teaching children's cooking classes and English as an Additional Language, Jennifer has taught at Simon Fraser University and New York University and has also worked as a writing consultant at the New York University Steinhardt Writing Center. Jennifer has worked in journalism, copyediting, and social media management, with publications appearing in academic journals, digital magazines, and academic blogs. She is currently an academic advisor based out of Vancouver, BC and is working on two books, one on the mutually constitutive relationships between place-making and foodways in Palestine/Israel and the other on the aesthetic and affective roles of food in video games.

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Article details

Jennifer Ruth Shutek, "Holy Wine Online: Deir Cremisan in Digital Space," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.14

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Shit in Our Time: An Unsettling Epoch of Metabolic Disturbance

by Daren Shi-chi Leung | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Human waste, often regarded as a source of disease, disgust and impurity, is being redefined as "humanure" by environmental activists, serving as a solution to land degradation in the midst of the anthropogenic crisis. Although a circular view that humans are not merely consumers of food but the producers for healthy soils has arisen, it can easily be overlooked. In China, the beneficial use of human waste, or "nightsoil," for food production has a long history. Drawing from my mother's intimate experience with humanure during the socialist era in China, I explore the metabolic politics of humans and soils. This politics reveals a unique cultural economy that was once constituted to complete a cyclic change from food production to consumption, intertwining the valuation method of humanure, toilet technologies, and the rural–urban exchange. I introduce the context of metabolic disturbance to rethink environmental sustainability in relation to the dynamics of our farming practice and sanitation/disposal system in China and beyond. I propose alternative ways to value human waste, aiming to nourish our civic imagination of food by transforming our metabolic relationship with soil, agriculture, food, and waste.

KEYWORDS China, cultural economy, human, metabolism, waste, wastewater

Narrating Metabolic Intimacy

My narrative begins with a little-discussed food dilemma: the fact that we excrete as much as we consume, posing a challenge of how we *relate* to our waste. I was born in a farming village in Guangdong and moved to Hong Kong in 1996, one year before the handover to China. One thing that made me reluctant to revisit my

village was the public toilet and its unforgettable smell. It was a two-level redbrick building. The upper level was used for excretion, and from that the waste would drop to the ground floor. This waste, also known as nightsoil, would then be collected by contracted villagers for use in food production. My mother told me that this public toilet was constructed to replace all backyard lavatories with the beginning of the socialist era in China. As a teenager, she worked closely with this public toilet, fondly referring to it as a "high-quality fertilizer plant" that supported collective food production.[1]

Nightsoil has long been recognized as an ancient, ecologically sensitive farming technique in China.[2] It allows human waste (*fen*) to be returned to fields as nourishment for plants and soil, embodying a circular view wherein humans are not merely consumers of food but also producers of healthy soils. However, such a perspective is easily forgotten by us who become overly absorbed in viewing our waste as nothing more than an unpleasant byproduct of our modern lives. Recently, environmental activists who promote compost toilets have coined the term "humanure" for human waste, advocating its use to combat global land degradation.[3] Instead of clinging to a waste system that generates unprecedented wastewater, Santos suggests that the agricultural traditions of human waste management in rural Chinese villages could offer valuable insights for alternative, sustainable models in "an age of increasing anthropogenic environmental uncertainties."[4]

A tale of human waste as such is disturbing and stimulating. It suggests what Probyn has called "metabolic intimacy."[5] It is a social and biological account of whether a nutrient cycle is manifested, and one that asks: how does a system of food come to produce the metabolic interaction between humans and soils, in which both participate in the rejuvenation of farming land? This perspective may rejuvenate the famous Marxist critique of the "metabolic rift" as that which reproduces "a separation of the experience and knowledge of human/nature relations from the condition of social life under capitalism."[6] Instead of seeing

human waste as foul and as a pollutant, I want to bring in the Chinese lived experience of valuing human waste—as well as its metabolic relationship connecting humans, food, waste and land—to the vision of our civic imagination of food. It attempts to envision a more-than-human mingling that "brings about the nurturing of a dynamic community of many kinds of being all interacting for mutual survival."[7] In the following, I will weave through my mother's anecdotes to explore the rise and fall of what I have called the "socialist toilet system."[8] I will identify a type of cultural economy of recycling[9] where the cultural significance of human waste is *discursively* established through the evolving context of food production in China.

Cultural Economy of Humanure in Socialist China

My mother was born in the late 1950s, growing up during the second decade of the commune era (1950s–70s). During this period, the Chinese Communist Party adopted a pragmatic, steady strategy for food production to nourish the Chinese populace after the harsh lessons of the Great Famine. The rural commune subsequently introduced the brigade system and its subunit—the production team. My mother's job was to collect various types of waste and produce fertilizer, and she was compensated with "workpoints" by her village's production team. She explained,

I would knock on everyone's door to collect ash from cooking; that earned me 2 points. Then, I would carry it to the dry latrine and mix the ash with dung; another 2 points. We would leave the mixture on the ground level for several weeks, after which we could use it to dress the paddy; 2 more points. It was a dirty job that not many people wanted to do. But if I didn't work in the team, I had no way to get food.[10]

Despite the unpleasantness of the task, my mother appreciated this dirty job, as it provided teenagers like her with a means to contribute to their household income. This labor of humanure involves a "value system" that imparts worth to human waste. It upholds a form of agroecological knowledge that rejects the binary view of humans and nature,[11] as well as the sentimental impediment between the mouth and the anus.[12]

The Workpoint System: Valuing "Dirty" Labor

In socialist China's planned economy, workpoints served as a means of remuneration, favoring local control over annual agricultural planning and the distribution of its output.[13] The workpoints my mother earned through her manure labor were framed within the context of the so-called "professional manure collection team" under the brigade. This team organized labor tasks ranging from manure submission, toilet construction, and maintenance, to compost application in collective farms. For instance, the wages of toilet cleaners were slightly higher than those of equivalent manual workers in the local production team. Members who submitted manure were fairly compensated; some received workpoints, while others were paid in cash from the team's budget.[14]

This value system effectively sustained household food consumption, including rice, sweet potatoes, and vegetables grown in collective and private farms. The fertility of the land directly influenced the annual yield, which, in turn, determined the amount of grain (or cash) distributed to its members. My mother had a unique strategy to submit more manure than others: she knew how to grow or collect green manure, such as legumes and Azolla. This not only increased her workpoints but also allowed her family to purchase "luxury" food items from the village's cooperative store, including meat and snacks for herself like dried sweet potato chips.[15]

The Socio-Technology of Toilets: Towards More-than-Human Health

The most extraordinary act my mother ever undertook during the Cultural Revolution was the demolition of her village temple. Far from being an act of Maoist zeal, her motive was surprisingly practical: "We needed the bricks to transform the public toilet into something new, akin to a high-quality fertilizer plant."[16] This endeavor imbued human waste, or humanure, with a socio-technological function, bridging the metabolic process between humans and the land. Retrofitting village toilets essentially involved equipping them with innovative "scientific compost" technologies.[17] For instance, the three-chamber septic tank toilet—also known as the "wet toilet" in contrast to the dry version my mother referenced—was favored in South China due to high population density. Technically, its sealed environment enabled anaerobic fermentation, enhancing fertility, reducing odors, and more importantly, eliminating germs and flies. This is what scientists today call an exothermic metabolic process.

Simultaneously, public hygiene officers (like barefoot doctors) who were grappling with widespread epidemic diseases (such as dysentery and typhoid) caused by improper human waste disposal were also interested in scientific compost. The promotion of new technologies that made human waste disposal both more sanitary and fertile was regarded as a form of grassroots mobilization. The hygiene officers were tasked with persuading peasants to abandon their "illiteracy, superstition and unhygienic habits" by emphasizing that "the longer our feces are exposed to air, the more nutrients are lost"[18] This socio-technological practice of toilets brought together mass concerns about human hygiene and food productivity. DIY toilet toolkits, complete with experiment reports, were freely provided to local production teams. The rural collective had to find ways, sometimes as drastic as in my mother's case of demolishing temples, to source building materials (like concrete or bricks) for their "high-quality fertilizer plants," adhering to the Maoist virtue of *zili-gengsheng* (self-reliance).[19]

Urban–Rural Circularity: Interplay of Waste and New Political Value

The production team often dispatched male members, including my mother's elder brother, a robust, sun-tanned youth, to nearby towns to collect urban waste. Despite the arduous nature of this task, the workpoints my uncle earned were only slightly higher than my mother's manure work. The manure they brought back was immediately usable as a basal dressing on land, unlike raw nightsoil.[20] This divergence was due to urban initiatives aimed at collectivizing the humanure economy. Local cadres, employing the fiery rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, painted the private night soil market as "opportunistic, profitable, and treading the capitalist path." This critique highlighted past malpractices, such as individual contractors adulterating feces with straw and counterfeit urine. These excremental habits needed to be *gaizao* (renovated) towards mutual benefit and ethical conduct.[21]

New urban waste treatment infrastructures were now required to facilitate both sanitation and fermentation. Large-scale septic tanks were introduced to store and process the growing daily human waste.[22] Municipal treatment plants converted urban waste into superior manure, which was then sold to nearby production teams on a rotational basis. This logic even extended to areas with sewage systems, where sewage was piped to rural areas for irrigation rather than being discarded into the sea.[23] In essence, urban areas were not just food consumers but also food producers, creating fertilizer for non-human entities like plants and soils.

This intimate metabolic relationship between humans and soils was highlighted by a unique cultural economy that valued and recycled human waste. A sustainable food system needs a sustainable sanitation or disposal system to close the nutrient cycle. It maintained a value system emphasizing agroecological knowledge while boosting the synergy between public hygiene and soil health. It's no surprise that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) once advocated for

“a cyclic change” that returns much of the constituent of manurial value which originally came into the town from the countryside in the form of food, to the farming communities (including peasants and land) themselves.[24]

Metabolic Disturbance and the Aftermath

The cultural perception of human waste in China shifted with the phasing out of the socialist toilet system. As a result, human waste is now often seen as revolting, polluting, or unhygienic—a significant depreciation of its manurial value. This represents a moment when the metabolic process between humans and soils was disrupted, leading to what I refer to as a *metabolic disturbance*. Within this context, discourses of public hygiene and sustainable agriculture are now in competition over the management of human waste.

With the onset of the post-socialist era, the reform state in the 1980s enacted the dissolution of rural communes, shifting towards capitalist development in all aspects. Workpoint methods and professional manure teams were disbanded, leaving no collective support for the humanure economy. Millions of food producers turned into smallholders, making it unaffordable to collect excess manure materials from urban areas. Consequently, the rural-urban exchange collapsed. The “urban trouble with feces” instigated a moral crisis marked by a sense of impurity and revulsion. Precisely speaking, this cultural disturbance left urban waste with nowhere to go, emphasizing the unhygienic nature of human waste. This chaotic management of human waste persisted for a decade until municipalities adopted Western hygiene measures, installing flush toilets and constructing pipes and sewers to dispose of urban pollutants into landfills and bodies of water.[25] Worst of all, the swift increase in the use of chemical fertilizers over the years became a typical response of farmers to this metabolic

disturbance. This shift has been criticized as a move towards capitalist agriculture, leading to the severe environmental pollution we grapple with today.[26]

In understanding humanure as an evolving social practice of human-soil relationships, it's crucial to consider what has remained. How has this social practice adapted amid the metabolic disturbance and other food-related issues (like food safety concerns) in China? A recent survey reveals that 85 percent of rural and ordinary peasants continue to recycle domestic waste to nourish their subsistence farms.[27] Growing food using traditional, organic methods rather than harmful chemicals is increasingly seen as a civic response to recurrent food scandals. Regular consumers are seeking reliable food sources and connecting with farmers who still use organic manure.[28] As my mother and other villagers often say with visceral recognition, "Vegetables grown with humanure have the real taste."[29] Moreover, the practice of using humanure has gained attention from the community-supported agriculture (CSA) movement in China. Young food and rural activists are assisting older farmers, like my mother's generation, to rejuvenate the scientific composting skills they acquired during the commune era. This revitalization forms a part of a regenerative agriculture initiative aimed at sustainable rural development for the health of both producers and the agricultural environment. The produce not only sustains the local farmers but is also sold to urban consumers through the CSA network.[30]

By incorporating the historical and cultural narratives of humanure from China, including its decline and enduring aspects, I argue that we are currently experiencing a significant moment of metabolic disturbance. An unsettling time compels us to rethink our perceptions of human waste, moving beyond its stigmatized image as a contaminated substance—a view that has only been reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic as health scientists treat it as an infectious material for tracking, controlling, and isolating the virus.[31] Instead, we need to incorporate human excrement into our considerations of public health, envisioning the creation of a "metabolic public." Acknowledging the essential role

our waste plays in the food-waste-soil assemblage could lead to the emergence of a "human-waste commons," potentially facilitating urban agroecological transitions.[32] The concept of metabolic disturbance serves as a lens to understand the evolving, historically grounded realities of human waste, both materially and culturally, in China and beyond. It presents a political disruption distinct from the colonial context of the US, where infrastructure for wastewater—either mitigating or remediating pollution—continues to uphold colonial land relations, as noted by Chow and Gerson, by facilitating the occupation and availability of Indigenous land for settler-colonists.[33]

The term "metabolic disturbance" refers to an environmental disruption that stops the nutrient cycle between humans and non-human entities, a condition some have termed as the global destruction of soil ecology within the Anthropocene or Capitalocene. Following Anna Tsing's insights, this is not just a crisis but an invitation to investigate the "not easy" and diverse odors of our time, to trace the good muck that "guides us towards possibilities of coexistence amidst such environmental disturbance." This muck symbolizes "one way of collaborative survival, [steering us away from] further damage."[34] As my mother insightfully pointed out while comparing two fields cultivated with different fertilizing methods, "Nightsoil has an earthy aroma, while chemicals smell like shit."[35] We must revisit the moral standards we apply to our excremental practices which, driven by fear of disturbance, "limit the potential for new political relationships, responses, and perceptions of waste."[36] Utilizing disturbance to foster a new relationship with our waste and food is a radical proposition of my argument. It calls for a rigorous metabolic approach to a circular model of food production and consumption, one that now includes waste disposal. This approach necessitates our civic imagination and action, urging us to recognize, evaluate, and negotiate the meaning of our body waste.

Acknowledgments

The work described in this paper was partially supported by a Faculty Research Grant from Lingnan University (Project no. 101912), and a grant of the Early Career Scheme from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. 23602622).

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Author Information

Daren Shi-chi Leung

Daren Shi-chi Leung is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University. He earned his PhD in Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney in 2021, where his doctoral thesis reached the final round for the prestigious Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Thesis Prize. Leung's research centers on the material politics of food and waste, exploring their relationships with technology, history, and community within China and beyond. His scholarly contributions have been featured in academic journals, including *Cultural Studies*, *Peasant Studies*, and *China Perspectives*. Leung is elected as a regional representative of Asia on the board of the Association for Cultural Studies (2022–26).

View all of Daren Shi-chi Leung's articles.

Article details

Daren Shi-chi Leung, "Shit in Our Time: An Unsettling Epoch of Metabolic Disturbance," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.15

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property* by Minh-ha T. Pham (Duke University Press)

by Elizabeth Verklan | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT In her second book, *Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property*, Minh-ha T. Pham continues her examination of fashion's digital labors, by analyzing what she terms crowdsourced intellectual property (IP) regulation. Pham argues that crowdsourced IP regulation follows a script that reaffirms the racial and class hierarchies that govern global fashion. A process that occurs across social media platforms, crowdsourced IP regulation does not actually adjudicate theft or ownership, but instead marks a site of struggle wherein the right to copy is publicly forged via commonsense, racialized ideas about who or what a "copycat" looks like. Pham explores this process through several case studies, as well as through the history of intellectual property within the fashion industry in the United States. Pham concludes her book with some reflections regarding the possibility of ethical fashion amidst a deeply unethical industry.

KEYWORDS digital, fashion, intellectual property, labor, race, social media

Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property. By Minh-ha T. Pham. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 176pp. (Paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1861-2. $23.95.

In her second book, *Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property*, Minh-ha T. Pham continues her examination of

fashion's digital labors, by analyzing crowdsourced intellectual property (IP) regulation.

As Pham tells us, crowdsourced IP regulation refers to "the everyday social media activities that emerge around issues of fashion creativity and copying," and it has become a standard practice within the global fashion industry (3). According to Pham, crowdsourced IP regulation follows a script that reaffirms the racial and class hierarchies that govern global fashion. Pham provides numerous examples of crowdsourced IP regulation, however her opening case study illustrates the norms quite well. In 2015, the Vancouver-based, boutique clothing brand Granted disclosed on their social media channels that they had been "copied" by mass fashion retailer Forever 21. Granted claimed that Forever 21 was selling a sweater that looked strikingly similar to their own design, yet selling the "knock-off" for a mere $40 (Granted's own item retailed between $200–$350). Rather than contacting lawyers, Granted posted to their social media, asking followers to "help us take a stand" and to "share this [social media post] with your friends" (1). Within twenty-four hours, "news about the sweaters gained wider television, radio, and print media coverage and . . . more social media activity in the form of shares, likes, comments, and tweets," including from celebrities whose own social media followings are in the hundreds of thousands (2). In sum, the brand's post went viral.

Amidst this, many noted that Granted's sweater bore a marked resemblance to the hand-knit Cowichan sweaters made for generations by the Coast Salish women of Vancouver Island. However, this similarity was not the subject of mass media attention or social media scrutiny; on the contrary, Granted was lauded as the victim of theft (by Forever 21), not the Coast Salish women. Herein lies the true purpose of crowd sourced IP regulation for Pham: securing the informal copy rights of elite fashion brands over and against those whom such brands regularly and routinely copy (in this instance and many others, Indigenous people). In this way, crowdsourced IP regulation ensures that the right to copy is protected for

elite fashion brands (most especially those of the global north), while most everyone else is left vulnerable to outright theft. Crowdsourced IP regulation undertakes important race work then in addition to socially reproductive work, as the racial hierarchies that constitute the global fashion industry are reaffirmed.

Pham is quick to inform her reader that unlike other creative industries, such as music or literature, fashion occupies an ambiguous area of the law when it comes to intellectual property. For instance, in the United States, fashion is not protected under existing copyright statutes. As Pham outlines, this is the impetus for crowdsourced IP protection, because "what the law can't or won't do, social media users are doing quite effectively" (10). Similar to Granted, fashion brands regularly encourage their social media followers to participate in the regulation of their IP, because brands that "actively encourage . . . crowdsourced regulation often gain more in cultural and commercial value than those that attempt to resolve these disputes through legal channels" (11). Indeed, enabled by an ethos of social responsibility and ethical consumerism, social media users take up the unwaged and informal labor of crowdsourced IP protection and in turn, perform work that actively shapes "market competition, market hierarchies, and market outcomes" (22). Because this work—and Pham argues that it is, in fact, work—is ostensibly undertaken by people without legal expertise in an area of the law that is itself ambiguous, actual legal damages or rights are rarely awarded or settled. Rather, the assumptions and norms that guide these cases are themselves the object of Pham's scrutiny, because they reveal "a racialized commonsense about the ethical basis of IP protection in general and fashion IP in particular, about public/heritage resources and private property, about Asians and creativity, and about the moral virtues of elite markets" (25). In sum, crowdsourced IP regulation does not actually adjudicate theft or ownership, but instead marks a site of struggle wherein the right to copy is publicly forged via commonsense, racialized ideas about who or what a "copycat" looks like.

Pham pursues her analysis across four chapters. Chapter one traces the origins of fashion's IP disputes, and outlines the ways in which copying has always been a vital part of this industry's profit engine. Pham evidences how contemporary understandings of fashion ethics originate in corporate lobbying efforts to secure corporate copy rights. In chapter two, Pham examines how fashion IP regulation is both a civilizing and racial project. Examining the "Asian fashion copycat," Pham asserts that while this figure contains aspects unique to a digital environment, it "derives from deeply rooted ideas about . . . Asians' technical superiority and . . . their cultural and ethical inferiority" (24). Pham argues that this figure circulates throughout social media in discussions about fashion copying and counterfeiting, and that, "the Asian copycat is ethical fashion's quintessential racial other" (24).

Pham pursues a different line of inquiry in her last two chapters, examining instances wherein social media users flipped the script of crowdsourced IP regulation, inverting fashion's hierarchies if only momentarily. In chapter three, Pham examines the 2016 case of the Thai "rainbow bag," copied by Parisian luxury brand Balenciaga. As Pham argues, the case bears consideration for many reasons, most especially because the hashtag employed by the Thai social media users "effectively draws payment from Balenciaga (in the forms of attention and information capital) for its unauthorized and uncredited use" of the Thai design (24). In chapter four, Pham examines the wildly popular Instagram account Diet Prada, run by fashion insiders Tony Liu and Lindsey Shuyler, and argues that "Diet Prada's refusal of mainstream ethical frameworks, logics, and niceties . . . reflects an alternative—but not perfect—value system for assessing the problem of fashion copycatting" (25). Pham concludes her book with some reflections regarding the possibility of ethical fashion amidst a deeply unethical industry.

Author Information

Elizabeth Verklan

Elizabeth Verklan is an Associate Professor in women, gender, and sexuality studies at Cottey College. Dr. Verklan's work has been published in *Lateral*, *Feminist Formations*, and the *Feminist Review*, among others. Her book, *Seeing Labor* (under contract with the University of Illinois Press), examines representations of fashion's labors across media in the United States.

View all of Elizabeth Verklan's articles.

Article details

Elizabeth Verklan, "Review of *Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property* by Minh-ha T. Pham (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.16

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life* by Renyi Hong (Duke University Press)

by Kuansong Victor Zhuang | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT In *Passionate Work*, Hong argues that passion at work is an affective structure perpetuated by capitalism to maintain its injustices and discipline workers. Examining historical managerial texts and ideology, career guides, social scientific work on unemployment, networking advice, software protocol, and office furniture, Hong shows how these are sites where discourses of passion are embedded, used to sustain and discipline bodies for work. The book draws attention to how the demand to be "passionate about work" is naturalized and internalized, calling attention to the ways that passion serves to obscure inequalities.

KEYWORDS passion, work

Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life. By Renyi Hong. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 248 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1822-3. US List $26.95.

For Renyi Hong, objects such as historical managerial texts and ideology, career guides, social scientific work on unemployment, networking advice, software protocol, and office furniture are sites in which discourses of passion are embedded, used to sustain and discipline bodies for work. In an era where workers are often called on to be passionate about the work that we do, Hong's work draws attention to how passion is in fact normalized and internalized as part of the natural order of things.

Passionate Work builds on an emerging body of scholarship that critiques how affective structures are deployed at work. In 2015, Miya Tokumitsu highlighted how the mantra of "doing what you love" lends itself to exploitative practices such as overworking and underpayment.[1] More recently, Ergin Bulut's examination of the video games industry discusses the alienation and exploitation of game testers who are asked to do what they love.[2] Erin Cech has problematized the notion of passion, critiquing the ways in which passion poses problems to the working class and reinforces social inequality.[3] Hong follows in this tradition to critique passion and its deployment at work. However, his use of a diverse and innovative methodology to examine a wide corpus of texts—which offers a genealogy of passion and its deployment—makes Hong's book a distinctive contribution to these conversations.

Hong's main argument throughout the book is that passion at work is an affective structure perpetuated by capitalism to maintain its injustices. Being passionate about work, both in and outside of employment, is replete in contemporary societies, and often described as positive and desirable. We are told and sold the promise "that work executed in line with one's passions will realize our creative capacities and contribute towards building a better world" (2). This deployment of passion, for Hong, is a ploy where workers trade their bodies, time, and labor "for a fantasy of passionate work or self-exploitative pleasure" (4). And while some bodies are more compensated and rewarded for making these tradeoffs, it is those who are exploited, tricked into economic hardship, uncertainty, and income scarcity that Hong is ultimately concerned with. For these groups, "Passion emerges . . . as a means of endurance, a way of cobbling a veneer of normalcy amid protracted economic disenchantment" (6). This passion is problematic, as Hong describes, for it becomes "a means of assuming sameness and difference in feelings, a tool to produce the terms by which unvalued workers in mundane occupations are to be pitied and rescued from their predicament" (8).

Against this background, Hong begins chapter one by analyzing managerial ideology to offer a genealogy of passion in work. As he explains, managerial texts first adopted the notion of happiness as the desired state for workers at work. However, happiness also meant workers were content "in a bland but secure ordinary existence" (42), detrimental to one's individualities, and ultimately corporate profits. Hong traces how from the mid-twentieth century, and paralleling the emergence of psychological studies focused on self-actualization, managerial texts began to focus on passion to drive workers' desires for self-actualization. This, ultimately, is problematic—while workers are disciplined and managed, first for happiness and later with passion, the prioritization of such affective states at work means that other kinds of ethical responsibilities are overlooked such as paying fair wages.

Chapter two puts forth a two-part argument to discuss unemployment and the role passion plays. The first focuses on the apathy unemployment brings, through a reading of *Marienthal*, an influential study of a village of unemployed persons and their mindsets. In the second part, reading a range of career guides, Hong considers how passion "can be rendered [as] a modality for resilience, a way for the serialized unemployed to persist in a brutal marketplace by presenting themselves as undamaged" (20). For Hong, unhappiness is manifested in these career guides, and serves as a technology of governance, meant to keep those unemployed dissatisfied in their current state, further perpetuated by welfare programs around unemployment. Passion in this instance serves to encourage the unemployed to continue to be productive for the purposes of neoliberal capitalism.

Chapter three examines workers who endure poor conditions of work, focusing attention on those who engage in repetitive work, such as call centers, production lines, and cashiers. Here, Hong discusses how gamification and the theory of flow are adopted as means to condition these workers by disconnecting them from the trauma they might experience in their current situation(s), so as to keep them

psychologically unscathed and motivated for boring and tedious work. Chapter four examines the built infrastructure of co-working spaces as the means to preserve passions. Hong zooms in on the figure of the middle-class lonely freelancer and how coworking spaces and notions of coworking serve "to build a space for attunement to the rhythms of capitalism, where workers feel "right" and affectively aligned to how they ought to be feeling about their work" (22).

In the conclusion, Hong offers an alternative to passion, what he terms *passio*—which "understands emotions and desires as external instead of internal, as forces coming upon the individual rather than forces originating from one's authentic nature" (179). As he explains, what the use of passion at work does is to forge and connect workers to the need to labor, "making work a necessary presence for survival" (167). Importantly, Hong highlights the ways in which passion obscures the problems of capitalism—one where "workers gain pleasure, hope, and autonomy, which are met with exploitative conditions in return: low wages, insecurity, long hours, high stress, individualized burden, and a winner-take-all market" (161). The critical distance passio creates between the self and our attachments to passion, Hong argues, allows the possibility of struggling with or even rejecting discourses of passion in our lives.

In today's context, where wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, and where inequalities between the top and bottom are growing not only within industries but also across regions of the world, *Passionate Work* offers a distinct contribution to scholarship by highlighting how our affective states are manipulated to keep us contented both at work and in work. Such is the case for many industries, including academia, in which overwork and underpay is common, and those in contingent and precarious positions are often extolled to be passionate about our work. It is in calling attention to the ways that passion can also obscure inequalities, even as it offers a means of encouraging workers, that *Passionate Work* offers a key entryway into a critical praxis that allows us to

recognize the affective structures which both disciplines workers and are themselves embraced by workers today.

Notes

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2. Ergin Bulut, *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2020).
3. Erin Cech, *The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2021).

Author Information

Kuansong Victor Zhuang

Kuansong Victor Zhuang is currently a Visiting Fellow at the University of Sydney and an International Postdoctoral Scholar at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University. He was a Chevening scholar in 2013–14, and a 2022–23 Princeton University Fung Global Fellow. His research lies at the intersections of communications, media, cultural studies, and disability studies, especially as they pertain to inclusion and the workings of technology. He hopes to use his research to contribute to current debates about how inclusion happens both in Singapore and around the world.

View all of Kuansong Victor Zhuang's articles.

Article details

Kuansong Victor Zhuang, "Review of *Passionate Work: Endurance After the Good Life by Renyi Hong* (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.17

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power* by Sampada Aranke (Duke University Press)

by Jenna M. Wilson | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Sampada Aranke's *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power* begins by insisting on the importance of visual culture to the Black Panther Party's platform before exploring the Party's use of political posters, flyers, magazine covers, a documentary, and other ephemera to mobilize community members in the wake of the state's murder of Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton, and George Jackson. In doing so, Aranke argues that the BPP "transformed these state-sanctioned murders into opportunities to engage political action" (2). Cautiously navigating the speculative and often violent nature of the archive when it comes to Black life and death, Aranke draws on the work of theorists like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe to balance storytelling with first-person narratives, archival coverage, and political theory from the era. Throughout, Aranke centers the importance of fugitivity and futurity to the Black Panther Party, which suggests a deep connection between the Black power movement and the prison abolition movement. Indeed, toward the end of *Death's Futurity,* Aranke argues that these "spectacularized murders mark a transition from Black Power to prison abolition." While I hoped for a more robust discussion of the transition between these intimately linked movements, Aranke's *Death's Futurity* nonetheless offers a critical exploration of the use of visual culture in revolutionary movements.

KEYWORDS Black Panther Party, Black Power, politicized looking, social movements, visual culture

Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power. By Sampada Aranke. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2023, 186 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1930-5. US List: $25.95.

In *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power*, Sampada Aranke engages with a set of ephemera that circulated following the state's murder of three prominent Black Panther Party (BPP) members in the 1960s and 1970s. These particular cultural objects spoke to the BPP's commitment to "the production of radical Black visual culture aimed toward revolution and liberation" (2). The BPP created a recognizable and lasting aesthetic that aided in the Party's growth by naming Emory Douglas the Minister of Culture in 1967. Notably, the cultural productions put forward by the BPP countered the state and mainstream media's portrayal of the BPP and Black people more generally.

Taking the centrality of visual culture to the Party's platform as her point of departure, Aranke explores how some of the cultural imagery released in the wake of the murders of Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton, and George Jackson memorialized and mobilized party members, while "call[ing] attention to both the political conditions and political uses of . . . death" (21). In doing so, Aranke argues that the BPP "transformed these state-sanctioned murders into opportunities to engage political action" (2). Knowing that they were the target of intense and violent state repression, the BPP responded to these killings with calls to action that furthered their appeal for armed self-defense, expanded their base, and upset state narratives. To close, Aranke argues that these "spectacularized murders mark a transition from Black Power to prison abolition," two movements that are inextricably linked (2).

While *Death's Futurity* centers a sensitive and perhaps provocative claim, Aranke approaches this claim with care and a commitment to radical ethics, openly discussing her archival methods, her decisions around what imagery to include, and how she intends to avoid reproducing harm or spectacularizing Black death. While I hoped for a more robust discussion of the transition from Black Power to prison abolition, which was saved for the final pages of the book, Aranke's *Death's Futurity* is a crucial read for those interested in how visual culture mediates revolutionary movements. In what follows, I will explore a few of the key themes

Aranke discusses throughout the book, focusing particularly on her methodology and the centrality of fugitivity and futurity to her argument and to the Black Panther Party's platform.

Throughout *Death's Futurity*, Aranke carefully explores the specificity of Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson's murders while considering how each case is related and indicative of the historical prevalence of extra-legal and legal anti-Black violence. The author's thoughtful approach to the archive is one of the major strengths of the book. Tending to the ways in which Black life and death have been systematically excluded and erased from institutional archives, Aranke turns to thinkers like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe to move "against the grain of proper archives" (24) and balances "storytelling with first-person narratives, archival coverage, and political theory from the era" (19). With acute attention to the speculative nature of this work, Aranke's methods resist finitude while addressing how the lack of eyewitness accounts and visual evidence "show[s] the ease with which state findings take shape and remain uncontested or unchanged" (31).

As she explores political posters, flyers, magazine covers, a documentary, and other ephemera that surrounded the deaths of Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson, Aranke engages with what she calls "politicized looking" (15). Politicized looking can be understood as a mode of looking that "encourage[s] an activation of context" and has the capacity to politicize and move the looker toward action (16). In this case, the looker refuses and contests state narratives, and instead, "is invited to slow down the process of image consumption in order to see the conditions through which life, and in this case death, occurs at an uneven, disjunctive, and violent level against Black people" (86).

Central to the imagery that surrounds these three deaths is a commitment to radical Black collective futures. As Aranke notes, the base of the BPP was between sixteen and twenty-four years old, and the Party acknowledged, in the

words of co-founder Huey Newton, that "the revolution has always been in the hands of the young" (17). With their collective futurity in mind, the BPP "worked toward living a Black future in their present" (18) while simultaneously keeping their sights set on a future "horizon line" (52), as Aranke names it, that was not yet (and still is not) realized.

Throughout the book—though most extensively in the final chapter focusing on the murder of political prisoner Jackson—Aranke considers fugitivity as a generative framework and political organizer. Aranke discusses some of Jackson's key theoretical frameworks that position criminality as intimately linked to Blackness in the context of the United States. In this way, as Aranke writes, "capitalism, and its (extra)legal collaborator the state, makes it impossible for Black subjects to be anything other than fugitives" (93). The tie between fugitivity and Blackness "gestures toward an understanding of Blackness still locked in antagonistic tension between the state and any notion of freedom" (111), such that unlinking criminality from Blackness requires "the total destruction of the existing social order" (100). The fugitive imaginaries that the Party mobilized in the 1960s and 1970s "open up the condition of possibility of thinking Black freedom," which is to say that the BPP's insistence on the value of Black life certainly *did* represent a threat to state legitimacy in that the image of Black freedom was incompatible with US white supremacist state logics (112).

While I was generally impressed by Aranke's astute attention to the ethics surrounding the imagery of Black radical deaths, as well as her intentional discussion of the limits and problematics of the archive, some of the language around the necessity and generative nature of the state-sanctioned murders of Black radicals gave me pause. For example, when Aranke discusses Newton's public letter following the murder of Hutton, she argues that Newton "pragmatically approach[es] Hutton's murder as a necessary sacrifice in the plight of revolutionary violence" (46), and later, that "Newton articulates Hutton's murder as a timely event in the service of revolution" (47). While I appreciate the

capacity of the BPP to mobilize and organize in the wake of such devastating loss, I am certainly wary of the framing of Black radical death as *necessary* for revolutionary futures. While it is clear that many BPP leaders recognized that their radical consciousness made them particularly vulnerable to the state's repressive arm—as evidenced by Hampton's timely prediction of his own assassination—the nuance between the Party thriving *in spite* of the state's best efforts toward neutralization and their thriving *because* of it is important.

My caution around these ideas is also informed by current contexts of anti-Black violence in the US. Following the conviction of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, for example, Nancy Pelosi thanked Floyd for "sacrificing [his] life for justice."[1] Of course, unlike Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson, Floyd was not a member of the BPP or, at least to my knowledge, engaged with radical politics that challenged the US state. Certainly, the impact of this statement is different when it comes from the white Speaker of the House rather than fellow BPP members who are thanking their brothers for their sacrifice to the revolution. However, while Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson were committed to radical futures and seemingly understood that their revolutionary aims made them targets of state repression, framing their murders as necessary for Black collective freedom makes their deaths seem inevitable, rather than moments in which state agents made cognizant choices to eliminate people that they viewed as threats to white supremacist capitalism.

Overall, *Death's Futurity* is an important contribution to the field of visual cultural studies, and it does an excellent job signaling the importance of cultural productions to the aims and actions of the Black Panther Party. Thoughtfully tending to ethical questions of the archive and imagery of Black radical deaths, Aranke's *Death's Futurity* centers the generative politics of fugitivity and futurity while directing readers to the importance of "politicized looking" to turn state-sanctioned violence and repression into galvanizing moments of political action.

Notes

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Author Information

Jenna M. Wilson

Jenna M. Wilson is a PhD student in the English Department at UC Riverside. Her research is interested in how speculative fiction and fantasy can be used to critique the carceral state and open up conversations around prison abolition. Her academic and political investments lie in building a world beyond the current carceral regime. Jenna is an organizer with Detention Resistance, a San Diego-based abolitionist organization that works in accompaniment with people detained at Otay Mesa Detention Center. She received her Master’s in Gender Studies from San Diego State University in 2022.

View all of Jenna M. Wilson's articles.

Article details

Jenna M. Wilson, "Review of *Death’s Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power* by Sampada Aranke (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.18

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago* by Kemi Adeyemi (Duke University Press)

by Naz Oktay | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Following the movements of Black queer women on queer dance floors in Chicago, Kemi Adeyemi shows how race, feeling, and the geography of the neoliberal city are spatially entangled. Black queer women's moves on the dance floor reveal, navigate, bend, and upset those entanglements that overdetermine their rights to feel, to belong, and to take place in the city. Black queer women do not dance to escape the realities of their everyday lives. Rather, they dance for moments where they can collectively reimagine, redefine, and reclaim their rights to feel good, their rights to take place in the neighborhoods where they are not "supposed to" take place, and ultimately, their rights to the city.

KEYWORDS Black women, Chicago, entanglement, gentrification, neoliberalism, nightlife, queer, urban

Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago. By Kemi Adeyemi. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022, 192 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1869-8. US List $24.95.

In *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago*, Kemi Adeyemi follows the movements of Black queer women on queer dance floors in Chicago. She shows how race, feeling, and the geography of the neoliberal city are spatially entangled, and how Black queer women's moves on the dance floor reveal, navigate, bend, and upset those entanglements that overdetermine their

rights to feel, to belong, and to take place in the city. Adeyemi emphasizes that the queer dance floor is not a space located outside neoliberal governmentalities, but amidst them, as Black queer women keep negotiating pleasure and conflict in these sites. Adeyemi suggests that by engaging in collective practices of taking pleasure, they "articulate their rights to occupy the landscapes of pleasure that the neoliberal city is organized around" and that they "want and deserve access to the sets of feelings that are associated with these spaces" (18). Adeyemi does not define how she is using "entangle(ment)" both as a verb and a noun, yet her notes on her uses of terms like "Black queer women," and "Black," "queer," "women" can be instructive here. She says her use of these terms are not to suggest a fixed understanding of language and/or practice of identity but rather to scrutinize how these terms often structure and organize experiences of people (29). For instance, one of Adeyemi's interlocutors named Taylor talks about the complex relationship they have with the label "Black woman," thay they feel it is "different than being a woman," and even though they feel "woman" is not a category they would like to be attached to themselves, but the world sees them as a Black woman (29). Adeyemi sees Taylor to be in conversation with black feminist theorists, such as Hortense Spillers, Evelyn Hammonds, Saidiya Hartman, who are arguing for "the idea of 'black woman [being] its own gender,'" and for the inextricability of the categories of race and gender that are "mutually constituted through a matrix of violence that continually reinforces 'black woman' as a seemingly stale and unchanging category" (30). So, Adeyemi indicates that the institutions that maintain and reinforce this violence shape the day-to-day experiences of people like Taylor who simultaneously feel constrained by the category "Black woman" but at the same want to honor that shared experience of being (seen as) a Black woman, which is unnameable within the bounds of the dominant "American grammar" in Hortense Spilllers's terms. Given these discussions, whenever Adeyemi emphasizes the spatial entanglements of race, feeling, and the geography of the neoliberal city, the reader might perhaps understand Adeyemi to be gesturing towards a conception of these elements as

mutually constitutive of, inseparable from, inextricable from each other; as if they have been co-constituting each other by binding in knots on knots to the extent that they form one indistinguishable, inseparable, entangled entity.

The book is divided into three chapters, as well as an introduction and conclusion. Each of the main chapters describes and situates the simultaneously affective and spatial negotiations and conflicts that Black queer women move within, through, and against in multiple and complex ways in order to illustrate how they "express the very ability to feel in complex ways, to feel beyond the limited binary of pleasure and terror that has long circumscribed black queer life, as a right in and of itself that they should be afforded" (19). The narrative authority is given to Black queer women themselves theorizing "what happens on and off the dance floors" (27). Each chapter revolves around Adeyemi's ethnographic research on a queer party scene in Chicago: Slo 'Mo, Party Noire, and E N E R G Y. Adeyemi's method of collecting and using the interviews is committed to being in a dynamic dialogue with her subjects. This requires that the ethnographer be accountable and self-reflexive as a participant observer, rather than collecting research participants' words for use as "data" to fit into an academic framework (27). Throughout the book, Black queer women narrate, theorize, and retheorize their own experiences, and "scholarly citations serve primarily as supplements that flesh out black queer women's experiences and add deeper context and complexity" (27). There are no assumptions, demands for, or pretensions of transparency.

In Chapter 1, Kemi Adeyemi situates Slo 'Mo within the neoliberal geography of Chicago. The original venue of the party, the Whistler, is a bar with a capacity of seventy-five people within the hipster gentrification of Logan Square funded by various private development projects. It is in these conditions of rapid development projects that "Slo 'Mo's slowness takes on significance" (43). When the party moved in early 2014 to Slippery Slope, located one block away—a much bigger, less intimate venue—and started to host satellite parties at other venues,

“party regulars felt an acute loss of ownership over the party as the palpability of their Black queer presence was swallowed up in the bar’s largely white, male, and heterosexual clientele” (51). Black queer women “mobilized slowness as a method of critique” on the dance floor, where the music played had gone faster to serve to the tastes and feelings of its new clientele (57). Taking these critiques seriously, organizers moved the party back to the Whistler, noting that “it was a difficult time for attendees and organizers alike” (57). Adeyemi asserts that the embodied experience of being a Black queer woman demands the recognition of the reality that some of the very few opportunities for connecting with other Black queer women “may be done in a neighborhood, in a venue, or through an organization that might not meet all of your needs” (61). Black queer women inhabitate slowness as “moments of presence and pause that comprise strategies of endurance and subsistence, that, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, ‘do not yield easily to the grand narrative of revolution’” (61). This is mostly due to that “the historical, material conditions of existing within bodies marked as Black and as woman and queer demand vigilant attention to the reality of the moment” as your very rare opportunities to connect with other Black queer women may be “in a neighborhood, in a venue, or through an organization that might not meet all of your needs” (61). So, their strategies of remaining at a different, slower pace“articulates ways of knowing and becoming known within the gentrifying landscape that reimagine rights to the city as necessarily negotiated along ephemeral axe” (61). Their strategic slowness, then, is not a move to escape from the violence of whiteness and heterosexuality that organizes the neoliberal city, but to find and make a space, even if in very short moments when everything clicks—*feels right*—in order to imagine their rights to the city, amidst the violence of the gentrifying landscape of Chicago, until someone “fucks it up.”

In Chapter 2, Adeyemi presents the entanglements of Party Noire. She discusses the party’s marketing and branding practices (including the practice of capitalizing Black Joy), Hyde Park’s racialized urban development, the University of Chicago’s impact on it, and discourses around Black neighborhoods in

Chicago. Such discourses render Black neighborhoods as violent and backward, in need of constant police surveillance, places to be poisoned, to be destroyed, places "where you certainly cannot feel good" (86). Amidst these messy entanglements and various scandals tied to Party Noire which happened in 2018, Adeyemi follows "competing accounts of responsibility and accountability" that complicate the various, at times conflicting, employments of Black Joy by the organizers and attendees in a place where "feeling is a deeply racialized and classed commodity that is differentially mapped across distinct territories of the city" (64). For example, in the wake of the 2018 scandals, the attendees demanded accountability and responsibility from the organizers. The organizers emphasized that accountability and responsibility must be shared among organizers and attendees. They then worked to create community support teams as well as various direct communication channels and physical spaces for people needing to take a break from the party for various reasons. More broadly, they worked to foster transformative healing. These efforts towards collective and cooperative joy, Adeyemi suggests, push Black Joy "out of the individuated pleasure that defines the larger neighborhood" and produce alternative modes of ownership of space and community (95). These alternative modes of ownership are developed as a result of cooperative and collective joy work, refusing "the proprietary accumulation of pleasure that defines Hyde Park's racialized urban development," which has, at times, infiltrated Party Noire (95).

Chapter 3 draws on what Adeyemi refers to as the "ordinariness" of the weekly party E N E R G Y to challenge some of the common methodologies of Black, queer, and performance studies. This chapter asks genuine questions that push academics to engage in self-reflexivity in relation to their work and the interests it serves, and in relation to the works they read, including *Feeling Right*. "How Do I Need Black Queer Women to Do My Work? Do I Avoid Black Queer Women in Order to Do My Work? How Do I Need Them to Help Me Think? How Do I Need Them to Be Absent to Help Me Think?" (119) are only a few of these questions. At the end, Adeyemi states that "this chapter was never really *about* E N E R G Y. It is

an attempt at a methodology of the black queer ordinary that is built through practices of description that open us up to speculation through, critically, self-interrogation" (118–19). The gist of the chapter challenges the event-potentiality matrix dominating minoritarian studies, where an "extraordinary" event, understood "as a rupture in time and space," becomes the object of analysis and is used to speculate an otherwise, a more just future (99). This event-potentiality matrix might in turn serve to justify the existence and position of the scholar within the academic institution, as it depends on assigning to and extracting the value from a scholar's ability to make the subjects/objects of analysis transparent and knowable. Against this tendency, Adeyemi experiments with a methodology of Black queer ordinariness which does not pretend to conceive of life as a structured narrative and which does not flatten the complexities of Black queer lives by rendering them transparent and knowable for academic consumption and value making. Instead, this methodology does not assume a position over them as "researcher"/"knower" and instead challenges and questions "the will to know"—the scholar's will to make their subjects/objects transparent, as well as the will of the readers, who may be other scholars, to see them made transparent. This methodology rather seeks to think with and beside them.

Paying close attention to the movements of Black queer women on and off queer dance floors in Chicago, Adeyemi offers a complex and insightful analysis of the spatial territorialization of feelings in the neoliberal city, which is always already entangled with hegemonic systems of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Adeyemi suggests that Black queer women do not dance to escape the realities of their everyday lives. Rather, they dance for moments where they can collectively reimagine, redefine, and reclaim their rights to feel good, their rights to take place in the neighborhoods where they are not "supposed to" take place, and ultimately, their rights to the city. These moments are moments where it *feels right*, when everything vibes together. No matter how ephemeral those moments are—because, as Adeyemi notes, "someone always fucks up the vibe somehow" (x)—they still offer a glimpse at different ways of being with and relating to each other:

different ways of living amidst the mess of neoliberal city. This book will be invaluable to anyone working in feminist studies, queer studies, performance studies, Black studies, and Black geographies. More broadly, it will be useful for those engaged in critical self-reflexive scholarship and ethnography, particularly scholars and students who wish to employ non-extractive and self-accountable methodologies.

Author Information

Naz Oktay

Naz Oktay is a PhD student in Gender Studies at UCLA. Her research interests include transnational feminisms, decolonial feminisms, and transformative possibilities of anger.

View all of Naz Oktay's articles.

Article details

Naz Oktay, "Review of *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago* by Kemi Adeyemi (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.19

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Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Plastic Matter* by Heather Davis (Duke University Press)

by Chayne Wild | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter* sheds light on the implications of plastic's synthetic universality, inviting readers to reflect critically on their relationship with plastic material and also with matter more generally. She outlines concepts such as plasticity and globalized unlocality, arguing that plastic's ability to take on various forms contribute to ecological disruptions, biological harms, and social inequalities. Davis highlights how plastic is an everyday, ubiquitous material whose harms are unevenly displaced with regards to race, sex, and class; for example, as waste that is continually dumped on the global South. She further details how the systems designed to handle plastic's excesses cannot contain it, leading it to swell out and impact more communities, human and beyond. The book critiques dominant narratives of plastic as an ideal of Enlightenment progress, while emphasizing the complexity of plastic and the ambiguity of its role and our relations with it. But Davis also argues that thinking with plastic invites queer relationships with new kin. Davis thus encourages readers to think beyond plastic's simple ubiquity and to challenge the apparent plasticity of matter.

KEYWORDS capitalism, colonialism, environment, feminism, new materialism, queer, sustainability

Plastic Matter. By Heather Davis. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, 176 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1775-2. US List: $24.95.

Every once in a while, I have an encounter with a book that is so upsetting that it causes me to temporarily disassociate. On return to my body, I find everything anew: engulfed by new sounds, new sights, and new smells. In this way, the familiar is rendered strange again with a fresh sense I can only describe as

seductively nauseating. This was my experience reading Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter*. I feel it is most appropriate to begin my review with an account of the unboxing event itself, as it marks the start of this tenuous encounter between plastic and flesh.

Excited to open the morning mail, I find a neat cardboard package emblazoned with the white shipping label announcing Duke University Press. Impulsively tearing open the cardboard, I immediately break into laughter: The book is wrapped in cellophane. I flip it over to read the publisher's blurb and praise: "Plastic is ubiquitous." "There is no outside of plastic."

I read the preface in which Davis outlines her family's intergenerational entwinement with plastic. Her grandfather worked for the chemical company DuPont Canada and was involved in the initial development of plastic milk bladders: milk, but with the convenience of a sealed unbreakable bag.

The morning swells, crashing into my presence. My toothbrush, the flip-flops I slipped on to check the mail, the packing tape and shipping label, and even my dog's poop bag are all plastic. I nervously finger the book's cover. It has a satin finish that feels not quite just paper. Is it also plastic? I pull out my phone (plastic backing nestled in a plastic protective case) and google it.

From the depths of the ocean to the highest mountains, in the air and water, on and inside our own bodies, "The world is now plastic" (3). But Davis wants us to think beyond the simple ubiquity of plastic as a "terribly mundane material" that is everywhere (1). She argues that plastic transmits a "sense of universality" that she calls, "synthetic universality" (5). Saturating my morning routine and present everywhere, plastic is a universal force. But Davis argues that this force is also synthetic in the sense that endless plasticity erases the differential dislocation of plastic, including the ways that plastic's harms are distributed.

For example, Davis argues that plastic's synthetic universality is a continuation of capitalist and colonial logics, as plastic waste is continually dumped on the global South. The systems to deal with the excesses of plastic production and distribution cannot be contained, so it swells out and ever onward. Davis discusses how plastic is even valuable, in part, as waste, and waste-dumps themselves are constructed as plastic barriers to protect trash from seeping into the environment. Plastic is a mutable, yet containing force.

Containment and recycling efforts fail, Davis notes, but the damages of these failures are not dispersed equally, as they are often imparted along lines of race, sex, and class. She writes that, "plastic is designed to be divorced from a specific location, appearing as if from nowhere and coating particular places in this sense of globalized unlocality" (5). The ease and convenience of plastic materials, like milk bags and book-packaging materials, is also intimately wrapped up in a throwaway culture that renders such dislocation invisible, further extending the process of uneven harm.

Davis's approach throughout this book is to think *with* plastic, as informed by theorists of feminist new materialisms, of art, and of queer agency. She heavily references Jane Bennett, Karan Barad, and Amanda Boetzkes, for example. While Davis is careful not to reproduce "universalizing logics" that are "impressed into plastic itself," she nonetheless argues that there is no distancing from theoretical studies on plastic, and that plastic must be approached by a method that "values and privileges intimacy" (14). Plasticity is everywhere, but it is also always intimately situated and near.

Some of the embodiments of plasticity are even surprisingly generative. She acknowledges, for example, that plastics uniquely reveal the boundlessness of life and the intermeshments of the "queer productivity" of new lifeforms, "for example, on the plastisphere, in the bellies of wax worms, in the generative landscapes of garbage dumps, or in the imagination of poets" (101). Queer

thought can inform new kin and relationships in a world of violence and uncertainty, as plasticity escapes its molds and bounds.

Davis suggests that plasticity preferences the mutability of matter, the "convenience" of throwaway culture, and the "liberating" potential of consumerism. Synthetics like plastic displace their origins and appear to originate from the creative minds of scientists (47). She argues that plastic thus "appears without ontology" (50). Plastics can be molded and shaped to be and do anything. In many ways this renders the harms of plastics invisible.

However, Davis explores plastiglomerate, a synthetic beach debris fused with plastics found in nature. She argues that plastiglomerate is not only evidence of the environmental harms of plastic, but is also an example of plastic escaping human control (60). Since dominating matter and shaping it in man's image are key to the notion of "plasticity," yet plastiglomerate is formed beyond human control and intention, plastiglomerate is paradoxically a plastic that undermines plasticity.

Plastic is also intertwined in communication and mass media. Davis uses photographs as an example here because they are dependent on petrochemicals and plastics. But plastics are also a "particular form" of "biosemiotic" media that communicate harms to bodies via mistranslations as hormones and cancerous cellular division (69). Plastics thus speak in further surprising ways beyond human intention.

Enmeshment with plastics is already beyond our control according to Davis, but such enmeshment nevertheless suggests a need for emphasizing openness and accountability in our dealings with plastic. In other words, the tensions wrought by plastic must be kept alive. Davis links such considerations of the plasticity of matter to Donna Haraway's "response-ability" and Jacques Derrida's "hauntology" to argue that while plastic matter is destructive, it also invites relationship and consideration with queerness, kin, and matter more generally.

While Davis left me in the damage, wondering what to make of plastic as kin, she nonetheless offers insightful analysis here. She fuses theoretical conceptions of entanglement with empirical and artful examples of how plasticity shapes our relationship with the material world. Thinking with plastic invites us to reevaluate our relationships with matter post-Enlightenment, as we must no longer imagine matter as "subservient and dichotomous to the wills and whims of the human mind" (9). Unwrapping *Plastic Matter* thus invited me to reevaluate my own molds, including my morning routine. Scholars across the fields of queer theory, media studies, environmental political theory, and new materialisms will find Davis's *Plastic Matter* similarly inviting and challenging.

Author Information

Chayne Wild

Chayne Wild is a PhD student in the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought (ASPECT) at Virginia Tech. He studies incarceration, technology, discourse, new materialisms, critical theory, and environmental political theory. In his free time, he can be found playing frisbee with his dog Kuru, foraging mushrooms, or riding motorcycles in the Appalachian Mountains.

View all of Chayne Wild's articles.

Article details

Chayne Wild, "Review of *Plastic Matter* by Heather Davis (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.20

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Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053